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THE MIND FORCE . . .

The volunteer's face took on a demonic cast, his eyes flicking open like a snake focusing for the kill. Then his cheeks began to swell, his clenched fists drumming on the table top in agony. As the other man's scanning force became more and more intense, more and more concentrated, the volunteer's tie popped from his swollen neck. He lunged back and forth in his chair, writhing in the trap of the other man's power.

Suddenly, a strange sound filled the auditorium, a kind of whirring, whooping, high-pitched electronic squealing. It was inhuman, terrifying.

The speaker clawed at his flesh, tearing at his own cheeks as the scan tone electrified his entire head. The scan rushed through his brain, blowing all its circuits. He blurted in terror and anguish, "No!"

His eyes popped wide open in one last desperate appeal against the torment. He tried to rise from his chair, but it was too late. His entire skull exploded . . .

PIERRE DAVID and **VICTOR SOLNICKI** Present

SCANNERS

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Written and Directed by

DAVID CRONENBERG

AVCO EMBASSY PICTURES Release



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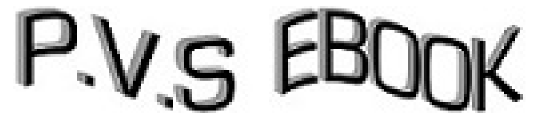
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SCANNERS

• 1 •

The auditorium in the headquarters building of Continental Security was in the severe modern style of any medium-sized corporation anywhere, but what the speaker on the platform was saying to his small, select audience of executives was quite extraordinary.

“I would like to scan each one of you in this room, one at a time. I must remind you that the experience is usually a painful one, sometimes resulting in nosebleeds, earaches, nausea, stomach cramps and other symptoms of a similar nature.”

The speaker paused, nervously jerking his tie. His reclasped hands twitched on the polished mahogany surface of the desk that stood like a low protective wall between him and the upturned faces in the front rows. The executives listened with relaxed interest. They had the sharp eyes of men who had received many pitches in their time. So far, their expressions telegraphed, they were interested but not amazed.

Behind the tense man on the platform the elegant logo of ConSec—three interlocking stylized arms—was dramatically backlit. The speaker peered out over the sleek heads of the executives, seeking moral support from a bunch of heavyset security men sitting alertly several rows behind. Among them was a doctor in a white coat with a medical bag on his lap. He nodded back at the speaker reassuringly.

“I know you’re all prepared for this, but I wanted to remind you just the same. We have a doctor standing by. No one will be allowed to leave the room until the demonstration is over. I’d like a volunteer to start us off.”

No one seemed keen to offer himself. They all avoided eye contact with the speaker. There was an awkward pause, until a lean, intense man put up his hand. The speaker responded with relief, gesturing to the volunteer to join him on the platform.

The volunteer did not offer his name, though his plastic security clearance card with its photo was pinned to his breast pocket. In his dark, three-piece business suit he seemed unremarkable, but for a certain tension around the eyes and a small odd cratered scar in the middle of his forehead, like the relic of a third eye. He sat in the spare chair beside the speaker and clasped his hands together on the polished desk.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked in a flat voice.

The speaker smiled faintly. “I’d like you to think of something specific,” he said. “Something that won’t breach the security of your organization.”

“Must I shut my eyes?”

“As you wish. Just relax and think of something specific.”

The volunteer chose to shut his eyes. He seemed tense but strangely unafraid. Perhaps he was skeptical of the whole business of scanning. Maybe he’d seen it all before and hadn’t been much impressed. However it was, he appeared alertly relaxed, as the speaker also shut his eyes, clenched his palms together, and began to concentrate intently.

The audience was more involved now, more on the edge of their seats. If there was anything to this scanning technique this was show-me time. The security men in the back checked out the scene with reflexive alertness. The situation seemed satisfactorily locked in. The white-coated doctor clutched his bag of nostrums nervously and stared through his horn-rims at the antagonists on the platform.

Yes, antagonists: the speaker and the volunteer had become locked in a mental duel that made them both sweat. The volunteer’s left nostril began to bleed. A dribble of redness ran down his lip, leaking from his flaring nose. A raw lump rose on the left side of his face just above the cheekbone. The scooped scar on his forehead seemed to hollow out as if about to blow like a miniature volcano.

The speaker was under strain, but at first it seemed he dominated. The other man was suffering more; his face was more tortured. Then subtly the balance of power tilted the other way.

The volunteer’s face took on a demonic cast, a grimace of evil. His eyes flicked open like a snake focusing for the kill. The speaker’s cheeks began to swell up like balloons. His clenched fists drummed on the table top in agony. As the other man’s force became more and more intense, more and more concentrated, the speaker’s tie popped from his swollen neck. He lunged back and forth in his chair, writhing in the trap of the dark man’s power.

But the lean man’s face was merciless. He shuddered with the energy pulsing from his mind. His harsh profile was like an axblade slicing into the speaker’s skull. The audience watched in paralyzed astonishment. Even the security men were too dumbstruck to intervene.

A strange sound filled the auditorium, a kind of whirring, whooping, high-pitched electronic squealing. It was inhuman. It was terrifying.

The speaker clawed at his flesh, tearing at his own cheeks as the scan tone electrified his sinuses. It arced through his brain, blowing

the circuits. He blurted in terror and anguish, “No!”

The man’s eyes popped wide in one last desperate appeal against his torment. He tried to rise from his chair, too late. His entire skull exploded.

His head burst like a dynamited watermelon. A geyser of hot red blood gushed from the stump of his neck just above his collar and tie. It sprayed the ConSec logo behind him and the front row he faced. For one frozen moment he was a gorgeous flower of gore, his body the stiffened stem.

Then all hell broke loose.

The security men were the first to react, their nerves professionally tempered. Their chief leaped to his feet, jerking out his automatic from under his armpit. “Don’t move!”

For the executives in the audience the command was irrelevant. They sat still frozen in horror as the speaker’s torso slumped sideways behind the mahogany desk. Blood dripped from the bright logo on the back wall. The volunteer seemed stunned. He stared blankly into space as the chief of security ran at him, aiming his pistol. His face was livid and drained at the same time. The round “third eye” on his high brow pulsed like a dying glow worm.

The room was a confusion of scurrying security men and abruptly panicked executives. The corporate officers blundered this way and that, bumping into one another like trapped rats. Years of studied calm were abandoned as they stumbled about in shock.

“Get them outta here!” the security chief yelled.

His men obeyed promptly, shoving the executives toward the exit. They went without protest, very glad to escape the scene of horror. Many of them were spotted with blood. Their crisp white shirtfronts were pimpled with red blots.

The security chief grabbed one of his men. “Radio ConSec Leader. Tell him we got trouble. Bad trouble,” he added superfluously. He nodded toward the volunteer, who had belatedly risen to his feet and was shakily peering around the room as if coming out of a very bad dream. “I’m taking this one out. Hey, you, come with me!”

The second security man was jabbering into a tiny radio as his chief advanced on the volunteer. He grabbed the man by one elbow and shoved his gun snout behind the fellow’s left ear. “Move!” he snapped.

The volunteer’s body sagged. His hands trembled. “But I . . .” he mumbled pathetically. “I didn’t do anything . . . just what he told me, ‘Think of something.’ ”

The security chief cocked his automatic. The click was thunder in the shaking man’s skull. “Shuddup.”

"But—"

"One more word and you're wasted. Out!"

The chief shoved the man toward a back exit. He called out to the doctor, keeping a harsh grip on the volunteer's elbow, "Doc, come with us. I need you."

The doctor looked frightened and confused, but he followed the pair out. The chief shoved his captive along a corridor behind the auditorium, catching a glimpse in the distance of the gaggle of executives being headed out. These important men were beginning to recover their powers of speech. Their authoritative protests and complaints could be heard rising querulously.

Two more security men with weapons at the ready joined the chief as he pushed his prisoner along toward the elevator with his pistol point. They took up positions on each side of the other two, eyes tight on the lookout. The doctor jogged along after, uneasy and afraid.

At one corner the captive man stumbled. He seemed to be coming back to life; he was no longer so compliant. Promptly the chief knocked him to the floor and put a knee in his back. The automatic remained glued to the victim's ear.

"Doc, give him a shot of Ephemerol," the chief said curtly.

Obedient as an automaton, the doctor squatted down before the supine man. He fumbled in his black bag and brought out a syringe, removed the sterile capping and squirted a few drops of clear fluid from the needle's point.

The doctor reached for the man's outstretched right hand. As he positioned the needle over the upturned palm, about to jab into the fleshy mound below the thumb, the pinioned victim raised his head from the floor and glared up at him.

There was such malevolent force in those dark eyes that the doctor's hand wavered. He had the fellow's hand grasped in his own, holding it steady. All at once the flesh he clasped was hot.

A force field pulsed from the prisoner's skin, blocking the advancing needle. In the doctor's stricken mind there seemed to be a steel sheet, thin but impenetrable, between the needle he was wielding and the other man's flesh. And the man's eyes were terrible.

The captive smiled up at the doctor. Though pinned beneath the security chief's solid weight, he seemed suddenly to be in command of the situation. In the background the doctor thought he heard that humming scan tone. It confused him further.

The moment seemed to be held forever. In the doctor's mind the needle pushed at the steel film. The prisoner smiled demonically. The security men were statues.

The medical man began to sweat with frustration. What to do? This strange standoff couldn't continue forever—or could it? With a burst of determination, the doctor jabbed the needle into his own thumb root and pressed the plunger. The prisoner smiled and sagged back to the floor.

The doctor rose. "It's done," he told the chief. Blood was trickling from his left nostril. He wiped it absently on the sleeve of his white coat.

The security men jerked their captive to his feet. He seemed sleepy. His toes dragged as they pulled him along toward the back exit. By the time they got him out the door and into a black sedan he appeared to be out cold.

The two dark sedans slid through the wet night streets. In the back seat of the lead car the chief kept his pistol fixed to the prisoner's ear, though the man lay crumpled on the floor at his feet. Two of his men were in the front seat, one driving, the other on the alert, pistol at the ready.

The driver began to speed up nervously. The chief barked, "Take it slow, Wilson. All we need is for a cop to haul us over."

"Serve 'em right," the driver grunted. "Why the hell wouldn't they take us out?"

"If this guy's a scanner, they won't want him down at Central," the man beside him said. "They're too scared. Why don't we just blow him away?" he suggested, jabbing his pistol at the captive's comatose form.

The chief smiled down dreamily at the man on the floor. "He's a scanner, all right," he murmured, stroking the trigger of his automatic lovingly.

"Hey, where's our escort car got to?" the driver asked suddenly. "Don't see it in the mirror."

"They're pulling up on our right," his partner replied.

They craned their heads as the other sedan drew up alongside. The driver of the escort car gestured the message that he wanted to lead. The chief nodded his assent and the second sedan sped ahead.

The captive's face was jammed into the darkness of the back seat footwell. But his eyes were wide open, staring intently into space. His upper lip trembled with concentration. Sweat beaded his brow, glistening like dewdrops in the flashing street lights.

In the escort car the driver's face turned pale. He began to gag.

"Hey," his armed partner said, "you okay, Barney? Want me to take over?"

The driver answered with a dry retching. He jammed his foot down on the gas pedal. The car shot far ahead of the other sedan.

"What's up?" the driver of the car carrying the captive blurted. "Is this a scramble, chief?"

"Follow procedure. Follow him," the chief snapped, neck cords straining. He jammed his pistol into the prisoner's neck as the car shot forward in pursuit of the escort.

"He must've spotted something," the third security man mumbled, twitching his eyes about nervously.

The two cars screeched through the black wet night. None of the occupants knew whether they were pursuing or pursued. A terrible unease seemed to fog their heads. Menace seemed total.

The chief spoke their fears out loud. "What if this guy's still scanning?"

"But the doc gave him a shot," the driver yelped.

"Yeah," the chief muttered, cocking his pistol in the prisoner's ear, eyes alert and glistening.

"Those freaks can't still scan when they're doped, can they?" the third man mumbled fearfully.

"No way," the driver said, and gave a funny laugh.

In the racing escort car up ahead the security man put his pistol in the driver's cheek.

"Rick!" he screamed. "I'm gonna kill you if you don't pull over—right now! I don't want to, man, but I'll blow you away if you don't cool this rig right now!"

Rick's reply was direct. He jerked the wheel shaft left and rammed the car into the wall of a warehouse. The sedan exploded into a blossom of flame.

In the following sedan the three security men looked on in amazement. The driver lifted his foot from the gas. "Oh God," he mumbled.

"Don't stop," the chief ordered. "Drive on fast!"

"But chief, we gotta see if we can drag those boys out," the third man protested.

"Oh God, oh God," the driver moaned, pulling up to the curb near the blazing pyre that had been the escort car. He and his partner jumped out and ran toward the burning wreck, leaving the chief alone with his captive.

The two men were stopped dead by a wall of heat. They cowered there, trying to find a way under or around, protecting their faces with raised arms. Silhouetted against the flames, they seemed to be engaged in some demented dance of despair.

In the car the chief took steady aim at his prisoner's skull and his finger began to squeeze the trigger. In another instant the slug would have been ploughing into the huddled man's brain.

But he could not take that final step; his forefinger simply would not obey his will. An irresistible force froze it there, on the verge of execution. With one part of his mind the chief could see how damned ridiculous he looked. The gap between firing the pistol and not firing was so minute only the most sensitive micrometer could have measured it, but in his head it was an abyss. *Fire!* a voice screamed. *Fire! Fire!* But it was blocked by a strange scanning hum.

His twp subordinates backed off from the blaze, baffled and afraid, and ran back toward their own car for safety. As they approached, the chief stepped out of the back door and leaned laconically against the car's black flank.

"It's going to explode!" the driver panted. "Let's blow!"

His chiefs response was bizarre. He raised his pistol, pointed it carefully, and shot the driver in the face.

The other security man skidded to a halt and stared down at his partner in astonishment.

The chief smiled dreamily. Behind him there appeared, out of the darkness, a demonic presence—a sly white face with glowing dark eyes. A flash of evil.

The prisoner. The scanner.

The chief raised his pistol again, like a puppet jerked into action. He aimed at the remaining security man and shot him through the heart.

There was a moment of absolute silence then.

In the leaping light of the burning wreck they made a weird tableau: two dead bodies on the wet roadway; the amazingly serene chief of security holding his pistol like a clever boy who's just bagged his first pigeon with an airgun; the tense form of the scanner behind him, controlling everything.

One final detail was needed to complete the scene. The chief of security knew it without being prompted. Like the good little chap he was, he dutifully put the pistol to his own temple and blew himself away. He was smiling.

The scanner nodded approvingly, then turned and walked off into the night.

• 2 •

ConSec Central was a blunt concrete thumb jabbed in the pale eye of a late fall morning.

The stark white structure stuck up out of the nowhere of a suburban industrial complex on the outer edge of the city. Its windows were slots like the arrow slits of a medieval fortress. The stainless steel ConSec logo was a modern coat-of-arms, bleak and stern. The entrance was slatted like a portcullis. All that was lacking was a drawbridge.

Inside, everything was dull and sterile. The long corridors were unpeopled. Only the winking television monitors gave signs of life. The sense of being watched was haunting. Somewhere a master monitor was registering your every twitch and itch, on endless spools of computer tape. It was a kind of immortality.

But in the ConSec boardroom the executives were very insecure.

Clark Trevellyan, the Chairman of the Board, was speaking. He was a full-fleshed graying man in an expensive brown-striped suit. The room was severe. A vast polished mahogany table gleamed in the low lighting. Only a few potted ferns relieved the starkness.

“Last night we at ConSec chose to reveal to the outside world our work with those telepathic curiosities known as ‘scanners.’ ”

Trevellyan paused gravely, to make sure the impact and implications of this revelation were grasped by the dozen or so men in his audience. Several executives nodded portentously. At the far end of the table a bearded, stocky man with rimless spectacles slumped lower in his seat. The tieless sweater he wore under his jacket, the paisley handkerchief spilling out of his breast pocket above the security tag, singled him out from his sober-suited colleagues.

“The result,” Trevellyan continued, “was six corpses and a considerable loss of credibility for our organization. This morning we have a new Chief of Internal Security, Mr. Braedon Keller. Mr. Keller?”

The chairman turned to the hardfaced man on his right. Keller was a solidly built graying man who might well have been a quarterback in his youth. His hair was cropped close to his skull. His eyes were black stones. His voice was a spurt of gravel.

“Gentlemen, we at ConSec are in the business of international security. We deal in weaponry. We deal in private armies. We do not —I repeat, *do not*—trade in fantasy and pipe dreams.”

Keller glared around the table, daring anyone to contradict. No one

did. With a grimly gratified nod, he continued, “Let us leave the development of dolphins and freaks as weapons of espionage to more fanciful minds.” He abruptly focused on the slumped bearded figure at the far end of the table. His eyes and voice became, if possible, even stonier. “With all due respect to Dr. Paul Ruth, I recommend we drop our Scanner Program immediately.”

A short sharp spasm twitched Dr. Ruth’s one bushy eyebrow, but otherwise he didn’t respond to this abrupt attack. If anything, he slumped even lower in his seat so that the table edge defended his deep chest. His rimless glasses flashed in the subdued lighting.

“Dr. Ruth?” Trevellyan said sharply. “Your response, please?”

The doctor sat up a little, grudgingly. His voice was low and chesty. There was power there, held down. He murmured, almost gently, “Mr. Keller, may I ask who composed our audience last night?”

Keller’s response was crisp; here was a man who had it all wrapped up tight. “Financial and political VIPs from all over North America.”

Dr. Ruth’s rumble became even gentler. There was a tinge of alienness in it, a foreign undertone, a touch Germanic. It murmured like the motor of an idling Mercedes. “Were all these VIPs carefully screened?”

Keller jutted out his jaw. “My predecessor’s screening process was, I believe, extremely sophisticated.”

“And yet,” Ruth said, “an assassin managed to infiltrate?”

“Yes.”

“He killed six of our people?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“We have reason to believe—” Keller began, then stumbled a little, seeing the trap, but too late. “He used scanning techniques.”

Ruth sat up straight. All at once he was a commanding figure. His voice gunned, driving straight at the security chief. “You mean to say, sir, that this very skillful, most deadly assassin who embarrassed us before the very men we so much wished to impress was himself a scanner?”

“We believe so,” Keller mumbled.

“You mean yes?” Ruth insisted mercilessly.

“Yes.”

The doctor made a wide gesture around the table. He smiled tautly. “This, gentlemen, is my response. The offensive capabilities of these ‘telepathic curiosities’ is obvious, no?”

“Doctor!” Keller barked, recovering his spirit. “Your program is

based on a list of 236 known scanners, right?”

“Correct.”

“Of that number, how many are now operative with ConSec?”

“As of last night, none.”

Keller turned to the chairman. “Then, sir, we don’t even have a program to terminate.” The security man allowed himself a tight grin. “In the circumstances, it shouldn’t be too painful for those involved . . .”

Trevellyan nodded. Several of the other executives imitated him. The matter seemed settled. Keller relaxed a little inside his crisp worsted suit.

But Dr. Ruth was not so easily vanquished. Now all the latent energy in his deep voice sprang forth. The fine-tuned, potent engine in his chest hummed with the power of absolute conviction.

“Gentlemen! I must tell you, it’s no accident that ConSec security has gradually lost contact with all the names on the scanners’ list. We have lost them to another program, one that is far in advance of our own.”

“What?” Trevellyan exclaimed.

“Bullshit!” Keller barked.

The executives muttered among themselves.

“Doctor!” Trevellyan rapped out, taking control. “Explain!”

The doctor rose slowly to his feet, removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyesockets exhaustedly. There was an elegance to his weariness, a certain style of irony beyond the range of his audience. And a coloring of sadness staining his conviction. But he spoke clearly and firmly.

“My long study of the scanner situation has led me to conclude, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that an underground has developed in North America—a scanner subversion, highly organized, sharply motivated. And it has a leader.”

“Nonsense!” one young executive snorted.

“Bullshit,” Keller repeated ritually.

“Continue,” the chairman commanded, listening intently.

“A leader—” Ruth began.

But Keller couldn’t be silenced. He was too outraged. “This is ridiculous, sir! Some people see conspiracies everywhere, Reds under every bed! A scanner subversion? An organized underground? Why, you can’t even get a couple of these freaks to sit in a room together without their going ape!”

Trevellyan shushed him with a gesture. His attention was on Dr.

Ruth. He knew the doctor was no paranoiac; he respected the man's profound competence. True, he wasn't your perfect corporation man, but you couldn't do without such experts in any creative organization. Obsessives like Ruth were necessary; you just had to know how to use them.

"You're making a very provocative allegation, Doctor," the chairman said softly. "Who controls this subversive group?"

"Yeah. Tell us," Keller couldn't help interjecting.

"He was present last night at that fatal demonstration. He upstaged us magnificently. His name is Darryl Revok."

"Revok?" Keller protested. "His name was on our list. He was cleared!"

"Apparently," Ruth said drily.

"This is total fiction," the security chief snorted.

"Mr. Keller, control yourself," Trevellyan commanded. "Doctor, you're sure of your facts?"

"Absolutely."

"What do you suggest we do?"

"Eliminate the competition."

"But how?"

"We must use fire to fight fire. We need a scanner."

"But we've run out of these creatures."

"We need a scanner we can convert and retrain. We need a virgin mind. We need to place him in this underground as our agent. We need to subvert subversion."

"Convert?" Keller cut in. "Retrain?" he sneered. "But these types are all pathetic, social misfits, dammit! Unstable, unreliable, useless!"

The doctor nodded patiently. He knew he had the board's attention.

"They are unstable. They are unreliable. But that is because their unique and marvelous gifts aren't properly understood, Mr. Keller . . . Like all geniuses, they cannot be comfortably pigeonholed. They're less at ease than you or I, more restless, more disturbed, because they're more gifted—because they are extraordinary."

"Perhaps," Trevellyan intervened, cutting into what might have become an impassioned diatribe. "But about one point there is no doubt: ConSec has been reached. We've been assaulted by our very own weapon! That's damn dangerous. For our own safety, we must fight back. Fight fire with fire, as the good doctor says . . . scanners against scanners."

"But, sir, we're fresh out of these freaks," Keller said. "What do we do, invent one?"

“Perhaps a robot scanner?” The chairman smiled, but grimly. This was no joke. There were times—often—when he wished he’d never heard of these odd creatures. But then, nowadays the business of security was often quite bizarre. You had to counter every new gimmick with a fresh one of your own in order to stay on top of the market. It was becoming increasingly weird.

“I know a virgin scanner,” Dr. Ruth was saying. “A very special one. I’ve kept track of him, been saving him up for just such a moment. I’ll tell you where to find him, Mr. Keller.”

“Please do,” the security chief said. He did not smile.

• • •

The vast underground shopping mall was an anonymous refuge from the confusion of the city streets above. In its warm blandness, its amiable crowds drifting between bright shopfronts, the cheerful smells of hamburger, pizza and instant chicken, the comforting background hum of the electrical life-support systems without which it couldn’t have existed, a lost soul could drift forever, free of time and season.

Cameron Vale was just such a lost soul.

At first sight he appeared to be just another chunk of human garbage churned out offhandedly by any busy city. A foul, stained old raincoat hung on his skinny scarecrow frame. A dirty brown wool hat was jammed down over his long greasy locks. The backs of his raw hands were decorated with old scabs and scars. His oversize shoes looked like castoffs from a Charlie Chaplin movie.

No one took any notice of him as he wandered between the plastic tables of the eating area scavenging leftovers from paper plates. Like a sick old crow, he pecked at bits of hot dog and scraps of french fries without much joy, washing down this feast with gulps of Coke and pop mixed up together in a stained styrofoam cup. He rested dazedly at a table eating his meal, unnoticed and unnoticing.

No, it wasn’t quite true that he was unnoticed. On the far side of the eating area hovered two men with upturned collars on their coats who were very interested in Vale. They resembled a pair of bald vultures hovering in the shadows, waiting for their prey to stumble.

Vale was oblivious of them, as he was of everything. He seemed to exist only in his own private space, as if he were trying to be invisible to the alien, angry world around him. He fed off its scraps, yet he was terrified it might suddenly see he was there and crush him as casually as a bug.

On a closer look his face was surprisingly boyish. He could be thirty-five, yet he seemed ten years younger. And the features were

sensitive. The soft brown eyes had tenderness hiding behind their terror. The sensuous mouth and dimpled chin gave hints of an intensely imaginative inner life. With a little charity it would not have been difficult to cast him as a youngish hippie poet down on his luck.

The two middle-aged matrons chattering over hot danishes at a nearby table felt no such charity. Insofar as they took account of Vale, he was junk. Catching his eye casually, the more sharp-faced woman of the pair grimaced.

It was one of those momentary eye contacts you make a thousand times a day in a city. The surface of your mind registers an impression and skitters on. Perhaps that night in bed you might have a weird dream sparked by that flash of recognition of another human being's essence. Most likely it would be totally lost in the jumble of mental chatter that makes up any waking urban life.

On this occasion the woman wanted nothing more, after having registered Vale as a bum, than to go on gossiping. But her eye was hooked. She could not unglue her gaze from the young man's.

This mind lock was not deliberate on Vale's part. He did not even really know it was happening. Yet his neck stiffened instantly, his head began to jerk in a queer spasm. His heart throbbed hard in his chest and his breathing deepened as if he were in a yoga trance.

Across the way, the matron began to shiver. A chill ran up and down her spine in the warmth of the mall. She tore her gaze away from Vale's but her agitation did not cease. Her skin felt burned and frozen by turns, as if she were being microwaved and iced alternately.

Her friend gaped at her. "Dorothy? You okay, dear?"

Dorothy twitched on her seat. Her heart seemed to be jumping out of her mouth. Her nerves were live wires. Her head jerked spasmically, dislodging her platinum wig. All at once she seemed to be like a doll roughly handled by some monster child.

A few yards distant, Vale's head was rolling. His eyes were narrowed to slits. Energy flashed out between his fluttering lashes. The force pulsing from his mind locked into the circuits of the woman at the nearby table. His head was startled with a rapid series of images, like a television set gone mad. Each image was an explosion of power in his brain. It was both exhilarating and terrifying. He wanted to run, yet he was rooted. Most frightening of all, he really had no idea what was happening to him.

Yet at that instant he felt intensely alive. He knew, by some instinct, that this was what he was made for. This was *it.* This was *life.* All the rest had been nothing more than waiting.

It was more than a cheap thrill, a quick hit, an ego trip. He had the *power* . . . But for what? Vale had no idea. He was as much a victim of

what was happening now as the poor woman across the way.

And she was writhing. She was on the verge of a full-scale epileptic fit. Her head snapped back. Her mouth gaped in a silent scream that came out a strangled gurgle. She hurled herself backward onto the tiled floor and landed with a sickening thump.

"Dorrie!" her companion screeched.

Dorothy rolled around madly on the tiles, banging her head against chair legs. The hem of her sober tweed suit rode up, revealing a rather risqué slip red as a lizard's mouth. Her long legs drummed on the floor. Her elegant pumps went flying. Her wig rolled off and hid itself in shame under a tray trolley.

"Make way!" an authoritative voice snapped.

A young man stepped out of the crowd, shoving people back from the writhing woman. He knelt beside Dorothy, grabbed her jaw firmly in one fist, and jammed a leather glove between her teeth. The matron bit down on it like a rabid dog. Spittle sprayed from her snarl.

"She's an epileptic," the young man said tersely. "Got to keep her from hurting herself. Help me."

But the onlookers were too afraid in their fascination. No one came forward.

"I'm a medical student," the young man explained exasperatedly. "It's simply epilepsy, don't you see? C'mon, hold her legs down. The spell will pass soon enough."

A girl gave her boyfriend a shove. He staggered forward reluctantly and grasped the woman's ankles, averting his eyes from the nakedness of her stockinged middle-aged thighs.

"That's it," the medical student said thankfully. "Don't let her hurt herself. It'll soon pass."

A short distance off, Vale seemed to hear this soothing professional voice. His body tensed, stiff as a board. On the tiled floor, the matron's body imitated his. Then Vale collapsed, his figure crumpled. His victim's form copied this exactly.

"You see?" the medical student crowed, happy that his diagnosis had proven so immediately accurate. "It's gonna be all right." He stroked Dorothy's dull gray-streaked hair. Without her wig she looked really old. Her eyelids fluttered pitifully.

"All over," the young man soothed. "Passing now."

For Vale, too, it was passing. He looked wrung out. Gripped in one fist was the remains of a hot dog. It was squashed to mush, the mustard yellowing his thumb. Vale stared at it helplessly. The homogenized frankfurter and roll stuck to his palm like a tumor.

Dazedly, Vale wiped his hand on his coat, smearing it mustard

yellow. This new tone added a certain dash to his tatters. He blinked, as if waking from a dream. He began to rise, to test if his legs were still there. They were, though shaky.

At that moment the two men in raincoats made their move. Vale sensed them instantly. Their menace invaded his mind. With an animal instinct of preservation he bolted for the stairs.

One of the security men ran after him. The other plucked a short-snouted air rifle from under his coat. It was fitted with a compressed air dart of the kind used to tranquilize wild animals. He lifted it to his shoulder and took aim at the fleeing Vale.

Vale leaped up the stairs in terror. He didn't know what the danger was but his head was bursting with it. The first security man dashed up the adjoining stairs to head him off. Seeing the trap, Vale vaulted over the handrail and tried to make the parallel escalator.

He missed and only just managed to grab the moving rubber handhold. Legs flailing, he was carried upward. Below him was an abyss.

A shopper riding the escalator hauled Vale aboard. As he was scrambling to safety, the second security man fired his dart. It zoomed through the air and jabbed into Vale's hand. The feathered guide hung like a tassel from the young man's palm.

Vale stared down at the unwanted ornament. He couldn't make out what it was. All at once he began to feel very, very relaxed. His knees melted. He sank to the ribbed metal floor of the moving stairway and was delivered in a heap at the feet of the first security man. Vale's last vision was of a pair of very sturdy brown oxfords as his cheek came to rest on the man's shoe . . .

• 3 •

Cam's next view of the world was a contrast.

There was a high ceiling with open steel trusses. Tracking down, his eyes took in distant brown brick walls punctured by stabs of light. The windows were industrial, small paned and grimy. There was a sea of concrete that was the floor.

There were fifty or so plain white metal folding chairs set in neat rows before the bed on which he lay, like an audience waiting for a curtain to rise. They faced him as he lay there, patient but expectant. Cam realized with a small shock that he was the object on show.

He jerked upright—but couldn't move. Nylon web straps fastened his wrists and ankles to the white piping of the iron cot. He lifted his head and stared down at his torso and legs. Another shock shook him. He was clean.

He was shaven, freshly bathed, and dressed in a crisp white shirt and pants. On his feet were white tennis socks. His hair was shampooed and neatly cropped. He smelled good.

He felt years younger. He looked years younger.

"You look good, Cameron," a deep voice confirmed. "Young. Fresh. Sensitive. Vulnerable . . . Good."

Cam craned around to confront the speaker. He saw a bearded, graying man with rimless glasses and sad, intelligent eyes. Instinctively he trusted him. Cam's judgments were always instantaneous; he trusted or distrusted at first flash. The essence of another human being was always unbearably vivid to him. In order to survive he had to categorize strangers immediately as friend or foe.

This man was a friend. Cam let the man's voice enter him freely.

"My name is Ruth, Doctor Paul Ruth. You are safe here, Cameron."

Cam blinked. He waited. All would be explained.

"You're only thirty-five years old, my boy, yet you're well on the way to becoming a piece of human junk. Why?"

The question was rhetorical. Cam made no attempt to respond.

He might've said, "I was born junk." He might've said, "What is junk?" He might've said, "Isn't everybody junk?"

But he kept silent. He had no answers.

The doctor had, though. "The answer is simple. You're a scanner. You don't know it. That's the source of all your confusion, all your

agony. I shall show you how it may be the source of great power."

Cam nodded. He didn't understand a word the man was saying; he wasn't even really listening. He was *hearing*. That is, he was riding the rhythms of the sad man's voice, floating on its deep sincerity. It was very sensuous, like being a baby rocked in a father's arms. He could *smell* the man's sincerity. It came off his tweed jacket, it pulsated from his neat, full beard, it oozed from the doctor's skin. It was very soothing.

"Are you listening to me, Cameron?" the doctor asked.

Cam blinked rapidly. He did not feel like speaking. He was too relaxed.

Dr. Ruth rose. He strode out of Cam's sightline. Cam heard a door squeal. He heard the doctor say: "Let them in. Hurry!"

There was the shuffling of many feet. A crowd entered Cam's vision. The place was suddenly full of people.

It was a very average crowd, the kind you might find in an airport departure lounge or in a theater, except that there were no children. The men carried copies of *Time* and *Playboy,* the women had *Cosmopolitan* or carried bags of knitting, which they opened and got busy with as soon as they'd settled onto one of the metal chairs facing Cam's bed. No one talked to anyone else, which was a little odd. And no one took any notice of the young man strapped to the white cot.

"Hurry up, hurry up," the doctor urged, until the crowd was seated. Then, abruptly, he vanished from sight.

Cam was puzzled, but not, at first, perturbed. Everything in the world was strange to him, so why should this be different? Why shouldn't fifty total strangers collect in what seemed to be an abandoned warehouse and sit in ordered rows before his bed? Why shouldn't he be tied to the cot? Why should anything happen or not happen in this world that made no sense to Cam at the best of times?

And he was still under the spell of the doctor's warm, deep voice. He closed his eyes and relished its comfort one more time.

Voices were very real. They had lives of their own. Some were tight and mean, choked at the throat, squeezed out like drops of venom. Others had too much energy for the hole they were being forced through. Yet others seemed so weak they were barely able to force an opening in the windpipe. But the doctor's voice sat easy in his throat. It was the voice of a man who'd come to rest in his own space, a man who wasn't frantic to inflate his power zone or, on the other hand, apologize for taking up air space. It was just right. How rare . . .

Cam smiled, a boy's smile of pure pleasure, innocent, touching. But then he frowned. He cocked an ear, as if hearing a strange noise in the distance. It seemed like many voices chattering. It was not pleasant.

Cam jerked his head from the pillow and peered at the people seated before his cot. They weren't speaking. They were reading. They were knitting. They were staring idly into space.

Yet the jabbering voices rose in intensity in his head.

Then the images came.

They crashed into his head in a flood. Trivial images, everyday flashes of thought, idle mental static. The ordinary stream of consciousness of any mind, but multiplied by fifty. It was like being in an airport with jets landing and taking off every second. It was like having to listen to every thought of every person, see every image in their heads flashed simultaneously on a giant screen. And the voices babbled on faster and faster, like a speeded-up tape.

Cam thrashed his head on the pillow, trying to fling them free of his skull. He was terrified by a sense that his face was no longer his own. It seemed that all the faces in the room were fused over his features, were *him.* Together and separately, he was everyone there.

His body arched against the straps till his wrists bled with the ferocity of his struggle to escape this mental invasion. He jerked so hard the bed rocked and almost tilted over. He shook and twitched and shuddered in a rage of possession. Yes, he was possessed, by every mind in the room.

The invasion was endless. The voices, images, thoughts poured into his brain unceasingly. He felt he was going mad.

And then, just when it seemed his skull must surely explode, the doctor reappeared. He jabbed a needle into Cam's thumb. Instantly, the terrible tide turned.

The invasion began retreating. Gaps of silence opened in the babble . . . deep, soothing silence, that widened into an empty sky of peace.

"Now we can talk," the doctor said, smiling.

He and Cam sat on metal chairs beside the cot. They were alone in the empty warehouse. Cam was as drained as if he had survived torture—which he had. Yet, in spite of it all, he still trusted this man. His faith, once given, was not easily revoked.

"I don't suppose you speak much?" the doctor said.

Cam shook his head.

"I'm not surprised. With all those other voices in your head, how could you possibly hear your own voice?"

Cam nodded. This bearded man with the sad voice understood so well!

"How could you ever develop a separate self, a personality? Oh, my

poor boy! How do you feel?”

Cam spoke for the first time since he’d awakened in the warehouse. It was the first time in days. His own voice surprised him. It was easy. “I feel crystal clear.”

Dr. Ruth leaned forward eagerly. “Do you like feeling ‘clear’?”

“I’m not sure,” Cam said frankly.

“Why? Are you afraid?”

“Yes. I feel very . . . exposed. I can hear myself.”

“Yes?”

“I mean, I can hear *myself.”*

“Your very own voice?”

“Yes!”

The doctor nodded gravely. “Good.”

Cam frowned at him. For the first time he began to have his doubts. “You called me a . . .”

“Scanner.”

“What’s that?”

The doctor stood up slowly and arched his stiff back. He seemed very tense, for some reason. Does he distrust me? Cam wondered.

Dr. Ruth took a few steps away from their corner. He turned abruptly. When he spoke his tone was dull, as if he’d said all this many times before and was beginning to wonder if he still believed it himself.

“A scanner is a freak of nature, a person born with a particularly intense form of extrasensory perception. It’s a kind of, well . . . derangement of the synapses we call telepathy. It’s a disease, or the result of radiation. We’re not sure.”

Cam burst out laughing suddenly. The doctor was taken aback.

“You laugh?”

“This is a nuthouse, right? You think you’re Napoleon, eh?”

The doctor became very stiff at this. His mouth was almost prissy as he retorted, “My name is Paul Ruth. I’m a noted psychopharmacist. I have degrees from Stanford, Cambridge and Heidelberg. I do not think I am Napoleon.”

“Sorry,” Cam soothed, still smiling a little.

“I specialize in the phenomenon of scanners.”

“Maybe you’re not mad, Doctor. But I am.”

This simplicity disarmed Dr. Ruth. He sat down again, opposite Cam. He touched the young man’s hand lightly, almost tenderly.

“Mad?”

"Bananas. Nuts. Loco. Everyone knows that."

"You're not, you know. What you are is a scanner."

"And what is that?" Cam asked again, rather tired all at once. He eyed the cot. It looked inviting. Would the doctor think him rude if he stretched out for a moment or two?

"That woman in the shopping mall . . . what happened there? What were you doing to her?"

"To her?" Cam cried, stung. "She was doing things to me!"

"To you? What things?"

"She was—forcing me," Cam said desperately. His head was beginning to be messed up again. The lovely clarity was fading.

"Forcing you? To do what?"

"To think about her."

"How could she do that?"

"I don't know! I'm so tired—"

"And the crowd who were here . . . did they force you too?"

Cam writhed. "I don't know."

"No?"

"They chattered at me, all at the same time."

"I was here. I didn't hear anything. Fact is, they never said a word. They were ordered to keep absolutely silent."

"It was the other voices—without lips—all at the same time—drowning me—drowning . . ."

"And you couldn't shut them off?"

"No!"

"When did they stop?"

Cam frowned, concentrating hard. It was suddenly very important for him to remember how the terrible invasion of noise and images had been reversed. "It was . . ." he mumbled. "It was . . ."

The doctor took a small black case from his pocket and opened it. On a soft green velvet bed lay a hypodermic and a vial. "When I gave you a shot of this?"

"Yes!" Cam jerked his head up and down. "Yes! Yes!"

Dr. Ruth removed the vial from the case. He held it up so that the pale blue liquid in the bottle caught the light. The vial hovered in the air before Cam's fascinated gaze, trapped between the doctor's thumb and forefinger.

"This is called Ephemerol. It's a scan suppressant. It does nothing to ordinary people. When injected into a scanner's bloodstream it blocks the telepathic flow. It stops the voices. It clears your head."

Cam gaped at him in awe. “That stops the voices? That makes you feel nice and clean and alone inside?”

The doctor nodded. “Ephemerol.”

“How do you know so much about me?” Cam asked quietly.

Dr. Ruth replaced the vial on its green velvet bed and snapped the small case shut. He sat back in his chair and crossed his legs, locking his fingers together professorially. This gesture touched Cam. It revealed to him that the doctor had his pretensions, which were harmless. Or were they?

“There have been over two hundred cases like yours . . . scanners. I know the names of every one. Thirty-four committed suicide before the age of ten. Another eighty or so died violent deaths in their teens. Some of the survivors—for that’s what they are—I’ve been able to help. I want to help you.”

Cam’s response was simple. “Why?” he asked bluntly.

The doctor was not put out. He answered, equally simply, “It’s my job.”

Cam nodded. “Okay. Now what?”

Cam’s nodding head is framed in a television monitor. “Okay,” his voice mumbles, deepened by speaker distortion. “Now what?”

Cam’s vulnerable head is a segment in a large mosaic of closed-circuit television monitors in the control room at ConSec Central. Every room, each corner of the vast operation is under surveillance. Heads chatter, figures scurry, empty chambers float in the flickering screens. There is an underwater feeling, as if all these tiny beings are swimming in a pale blue element.

Keller, chief of security, is at the control console. He has all the sound turned down, except for the speakers monitoring Cam and Dr. Ruth. His hard eyes narrow dangerously as the doctor’s image swims into focus.

“I want to show you something,” Dr. Ruth says out of the speaker. The Germanic lisp in his voice is emphasized by the electronics. “I want to show you you’re not unique, Cameron . . .”

Keller reaches for the phone on the console. He punches out a number urgently, frowning as the doctor moves out of camera range.

“I want to show you you’re not unique, Cameron,” Dr. Ruth said, rising.

The doctor walked to a battered metal cupboard along the brick wall. As Cam watched puzzledly, he took out a small movie projector

and a roll-up screen.

Dr. Ruth set up the screen and projector with the solemn concentration of the laboratory scientist. There was truly something touching about this man, Cam mused once again. He seemed so . . . earnest. He seemed so very, very serious. You are sane and I am mad, Cam thought, perplexed. Or is it the other way around? What was perplexing, and always had been, was the way some perfectly ordinary things were considered sane by the "normal" world, and others totally nuts. What was the distinction? For the life of him, Cam could never figure it out.

The doctor returned to his chair beside Cam. In his fist he held a small remote-control unit for the projector. He nodded at Cam. Cam nodded back. They both looked at the small screen expectantly. Isolated in the vast warehouse, an island in the empty sea of concrete, the two men waited for the movie to begin.

A film leader countdown flashed on the screen—5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Then a jumpy title:

CRANE PSYCHIATRIC INSTITUTE.
REF: #32407
JANUARY 4, 1967. SUBJECT:
DARRYL REVOK, AGE 22.

"Revok?" Cam giggled. "Funny name!"

The doctor silenced him with a glare. He was bent forward tensely, his upper body rigid as a post. His rimless glasses glinted with the light from the screen. Cam resolved to be serious.

Revok's face flickered on the screen. It was young, younger even than Cam's, but never boyish. It was a face that was born knowing, a face that seemed to have lived in many times over in previous incarnations. It was the face of a young Dorian Gray.

But the most startling thing was the patch of Elastoplast covering his nose and half his forehead. Upon it was painted a large "third eye" complete with vivid black lashes and staring pupil.

"Why?" Cam blurted.

Dr. Ruth shushed him with a fierce gesture. "Watch! Listen!"

Revok's face was framed in a mirror. The film was shot from behind a two-way screen opening into a small interrogation room. Revok wore the white hospital gown of a patient in the psychiatric ward. He was alone in the chamber, seated at a bare white table upon which his tense fists were clasped together. He leered at the unseen camera mockingly, a trapped wild animal on display.

A woman's voice crackled from the speaker. "Darryl, tell us what

you did, please," it said, in that know-it-all tone psychiatrists use with their poor demented victims.

Revok's expression went deadpan. "I drilled a hole in my head," he said. His voice was almost sensual in its suppressed ferocity.

"Where did you drill the hole?" the female interrogator asked.

Revok jabbed a derisive thumb at his brow. "Can't you see?"

"Why did you do it, Darryl? Why did you drill the hole?"

Revok's sly mouth twisted in a grin, as if he were about to fling back a flip retort. But instead he said, with a twitch of anguish, "Too much pressure."

"Pressure?"

Revok tapped his 'third eye.' "In there."

"You wanted to let it out, the pressure?"

Revok released his twisted grin. "You ain't so dumb, lady."

"What was the pressure, Darryl? What caused it?"

Revok's reply was curt. "People."

"People?"

"Gee, Doc, I wish you wouldn't parrot everything I say," Revok complained.

"Tell me about the people in your head, Darryl," the professional voice soothed.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

This rather unprofessional retort amused Revok. "People. Too many, in here," he emphasized, tapping his temple. "No room left for Darryl."

"Voices?"

"Yes. And hands. And feet. And eyes. And noses. And knees. *People!"*

"Be calm, Darryl, be calm."

Revok gave a derisive snort and turned his face away.

"Darryl—"

Revok whirled on the camera like a tensed cat. "Don't patronize me, lady! Don't ever patronize Revok!"

Beside Cam, the doctor released a strange sound—a grunt of pain, perhaps. A suppressed groan of sympathy? Cam himself was very caught up in the movie. That tense three-eyed face on the screen was frightening and saddening at the same time. The audience of two were totally wrapped up in the images on the screen.

"I'm sorry," the female doctor's voice apologized.

"No you're not, but never mind," Revok shrugged. "Next question?"

"I'd very much like to know what it is you've put over the hole in your head."

"A door."

"A d—! Sorry. Why a door?"

"To let the people out, obviously."

"I see. And why did you paint an eye on the door?"

"To fool 'em. If they think it's just another eye, they won't try to get back in, see?"

"Mm . . . You think that'll fool them?"

"You mean it won't?" Revok said, startled.

"Are the people that easily fooled?"

Revok began to tremble. His fists fought one another on the table top. This question had gotten to him.

"No? No?" he mumbled.

"Is that really the only way they can get back into your head?" the doctor's voice pressed.

Revok's face sharpened suddenly. He realized the unseen interrogator was not taking him seriously. "Sure," he said slyly. "Want me to show you?"

"Pardon?" the female voice asked, surprised out of its smugness.

"Want me to show you how the people get into my head?" Revok challenged. He ripped the Elastoplast away from his brow. The raw wound there, a perfect round hole, was abruptly revealed. The doctor's gasp was most unprofessional.

"Darryl!"

Revok turned his back to the camera. He hunched over, doing something out of view.

"Darryl?" The doctor's voice wobbled. "Darryl?"

Revok swung back to face the camera's eye. In his hand was a glass of water. He held it up high and tilted it. The water flowed out in a silver arc.

"Darryl!"

"This is for you, Doc. Just for you," Revok said. He hurled the tumbler at the screen and the glass shattered.

There was an abrupt babble of voices. Revok's face was seen laughing wildly, fragmented by the smashed glass of the two-way mirror. In this kaleidoscope two disjointed white-coated figures burst into the chamber and grabbed Revok. He was dragged whooping from the interrogation room as the camera ran on, recording his mad mirth . . .

• 4 •

The projector clicked off. The screen was blank.

Cam's face was white. "That's me, isn't it?" he mumbled, not daring to look at Dr. Ruth.

The doctor reached out and squeezed Cam's shoulder. It was so skinny under the white shirt . . . Ruth frowned to hide his own distress.

"It's you as you have been," he said softly. "Not as you can be."

Cam glanced up shyly. "You want to scare me, huh?"

"No, no," the doctor protested, genuinely shocked. "I only wanted to warn you, and to show you you weren't a freak."

"But he's a freak," Cam said stubbornly, gesturing at the screen. "Revok."

"More than that, Cameron. He is evil."

The use of this oddly old-fashioned word made Cam smile. "Evil?" He grimaced. "What is that?"

"I'm glad you've no idea," Ruth said tersely, and meant it.

"Is he still like that?"

"Worse."

"Oh no!"

"Yes. At the age of twenty two Darryl Revok was *self*-destructive. Now he'd like to obliterate the whole world."

"Poor guy," Cam murmured. Tears stung his eyes.

"You're sorry for him?" Ruth asked, amazed. "You've such a soft heart! But don't waste your sympathy. Revok is beyond pity. He's your enemy and mine."

"But I don't even know him!"

The doctor leaned close to Cam. The whole weight of his sadness and solemnity rested on Cam's chest.

"But he knows *you.*"

"How—" Cam blurted, really upset by this idea.

"Somehow Revok has acquired the master lists of all scanners ever known to be born. He has tracked them down one by one. He's asked them to join him in some demented crusade against the society that created monsters like him."

"I don't understand."

The doctor sighed. “I do.” The look on his face at that moment was unbearable in its profound melancholy.

“What does he want from me, this Revok?”

“You’re on the list. He’s after you. But I found you first. You can help me, and yourself.”

“I just don’t understand,” Cam said helplessly.

“My boy,” Ruth murmured, squeezing Cam’s shoulder again, “don’t you see? Revok’s at war with the world! All scanners who’ve refused to join him have been murdered.”

“Murdered!”

“These murders are a tragedy. Scanners are our very last hope as a species.”

There was a silence. The confusion was seeping back into Cam’s head. He shook it worriedly.

“Is scanning really a disease, a ‘derangement of the synapses’ kind of thing?”

Dr. Ruth removed his spectacles. He dug his thumbs into the corners of his eyes. “Scientifically speaking, yes. Humanly speaking, no.”

“Why are you so sad?” Cam asked suddenly.

“Pardon?” Ruth frowned.

“Tell me about scanning,” Cam cut in, to save the man embarrassment.

“Scanners are our last hope,” the doctor said flatly. He replaced his spectacles on the bridge of his nose with extreme fastidiousness, as if it were tremendously important that they should sit just right. “Our present faculties have failed us; the human race has run itself into a black hole. It’s about to be swallowed up by its own cleverness, which is its own stupidity. Am I making sense?”

“No,” Cam said frankly.

“I’ll try to make it simple. Our dilemma is that we can’t read one another properly. Each individual is locked in his own head, at a time when it’s crucial we communicate, and fast. Sure, there are machines, but that introduces an inhuman intermediary between one man and another. Scanners can leap that gap. They could be our salvation.”

Cam nodded. A genuine understanding was dawning in his innocent mind. “You mean I can do it?”

“Absolutely. You see, I happen to believe that scanners are the most remarkable human beings who’ve ever walked this planet.”

“Wow!” Cam said.

“You think I’m joking?” Ruth demanded, offended.

“Joking? Not you!” Cam laughed outright.

“Cameron, you and your kind can transform the nature of humanity. You have, in abundance, the quality that artists have always valued: perception, the capacity to intuit another person’s mind, to *know* him. But for an artist, poet, writer that gift is always elusive. It comes and goes. It is fragmentary. For a scanner it is total—total knowing.”

“Oh my God,” Cam muttered, excited and appalled.

“You’re a very important man,” Ruth said simply.

“Oh my God,” Cam mumbled. “Oh my God.”

“But before we can accomplish anything positive, we must stop Revok. He’s a genius out of control, a mad dog off its leash ready to tear the whole world to shreds. We must stop him, now!”

Cam blinked. “What can I do?”

The doctor rose. “Follow me.”

“Where to?” Cam asked fearfully.

“I want to test your power,” the doctor said curtly. He walked out without a backward glance.

Cam looked around nervously. He realized night had fallen, and it surprised him. This space was timeless. He was sad to leave the safety of the warehouse. For a while—a long while, it seemed—this place had been home. Cam hadn’t had many real homes in his unhappy life. Now, he sensed, he was entering a very complex world.

But the doctor’s phrase rang in his mind: *“You’re a very important man.”*

No one had ever said that to him before. It stiffened his spine.

Cam strode boldly toward the door.

• • •

At about the same time, Braedon Keller, chief of security at ConSec, was briskly mounting the escalator of a downtown subway station.

His coat collar was turned up against the November chill. Or perhaps he wanted to hide his face? Certainly there was something furtive about the way he eased through the sparse crowd on the platform, making his way toward a glass windbreak enclosing three cantilevered plastic bucket seats in dark blue.

A man was waiting for him there, hidden in the shadows. Keller took the seat nearby, looking casually around to see if he were being watched. Trains rattled in and out of the busy station, covering the other man’s low voice, his whispered, “Well?”

Keller spoke quickly, like a replayed tape. “ConSec isn’t ready to abandon their program. Paul Ruth came up with a secret weapon!”

“What?” his companion murmured.

"A scanner. Someone you've been hunting, I think. Named Cameron Vale."

"Vale!"

The man's intensity startled Keller. It was unusual. He tried to make out the expression on the hidden features, but there was too much shadow.

"That bad?"

"Vale . . . You're sure?"

"I've monitored him. Got him on tape. Ruth knew exactly where to find him. Odd, eh?"

"Where's he now?"

"Ruth's testing him out."

"He's in bad shape?"

"He functions—just barely. Nothing to fret about."

"No?" The hidden man's voice was profoundly doubtful.

"No," Keller said crisply, sure of his facts. "He's weak, very weak."

A silence. For a space the platform was free of trains and people. Keller could almost hear the other man breathe.

Then, suddenly, the man shoved his face toward Keller. It came into the light from an approaching train, sharp as an ax.

It was Revok.

His dark eyes glittered with an expression Keller could not fathom, but it was not pleasant.

"Vale," Revok said softly. "Cameron Vale."

"Welcome to our psychic gymnasium," Dr. Ruth said, a trifle sardonic, yet proud.

Cam blinked in the harsh light. At first sight the big room was like some sort of high school gym. Parallel bars lined the walls; there were tumbling mats on the polished oak floor. An air of brisk sportiness was given off by several men in white sweatshirts and jeans, who turned out to be technicians.

Psychic gymnasium. The phrase echoed in Cam's mind. He began to see what Dr. Ruth had meant.

There was electronic equipment everywhere—heart monitors, computer terminals, machines for measuring every human function. For one wild moment Cam imagined the electronics were working out, exercising their muscles in the "gym," until he saw the man . . .

"Cameron Vale, meet Yoga Master Dieter Tautz," the doctor was saying.

Tautz was seated crosslegged on a mat in the middle of the floor. Technicians were attaching electrodes to his temples, wrist and chest. The wires ran back across the polished oak and vanished into the monitors. Yoga Master Tautz resembled nothing so much as a tiny bearded monkey powered by electronics.

The little monkey smiled up at Cam. It was a serene smile, almost otherworldly in its assumption of superiority, its detachment from the mundane. Tautz's face was lean, ascetic, fanatical. He had no doubt he was in total control of his fate.

Cam disliked him instantly.

Dr. Ruth's voice rolled on. "Mr. Tautz has kindly consented to be your psychic sparring partner, Cameron. He is a supreme master of all yoga techniques. He has demonstrated beyond doubt that he is able to control, at will, his heart rate, Alpha wave rhythm and other supposedly autonomic physical and mental functions."

Tautz smiled his small serene smirk. Cam scowled.

Ruth addressed the chief technician. "Are we ready, James?"

"Quite ready, Doctor."

Ruth put a hand on Cam's shoulder and pressed him down onto the mat facing Tautz.

"I don't want the wires," Cam blurted, suddenly afraid.

"Wires? Oh no, not for you," the doctor soothed. "It's Mr. Tautz we wish to monitor. We want to see if you can break his self-control."

"Oh."

Cam looked at his antagonist. He knew at once that he could break this man. It was an instinct.

Cam shrugged. "Okay."

Dr. Ruth brought up a metal chair and placed it to one side, like a net judge in a tennis tournament. He sat down, crossed his legs and addressed Cam in a didactic tone.

"Cameron, I want you to slowly release your scan. Slowly, with focus, understand? Good. I want it to touch the master's heart, not his brain. Heart, not brain."

Cam looked puzzled, even disappointed. The doctor's tone became even more pedagogic.

"Scanning is not mind reading. It is the direct linkage of two nervous systems separated physically. I want you to link your nervous system with the master's, brain to heart. I want you to force his pulse rate higher and higher, against all the force of his self-control. I want you to break his will. Understood?"

Cam nodded. "That's easy."

Ruth blinked. He looked almost shocked by Cam's certainty. Tautz, fortunately, was absent. He had closed his eyes, and was already deep into a self induced yogic trance.

"This man is a master!" the doctor said sharply. "If his heart begins to speed up, he will control it instantly. He has absolute will."

"All I have to do is make his heart beat fast?" Cam asked.

"That's all," Ruth said tartly. He signaled the technician, who switched in two oscilloscopes. The upper screen read HEART, the lower screen ALPHA WAVE.

The heart monitor registered an even pulse rate. The blip on the Alpha wave screen was steady as a rock.

"Let battle commence!" Dr. Ruth proclaimed, allowing himself a little levity. "Let's see what you're made of, Cameron Vale."

Cam settled himself on his haunches. He focused on the small entranced figure on the mat before him and felt the first spurt of energy prickle his nape. The short hairs tingled. His eyes locked on.

A wave of power sparked in the root of his spine and raced up into his hindbrain. It leaped across the arc of his skull and turned his eyes to cold fire. His irises were lucent screens on which was traced a map of the little master's automatic nervous system. A force tracer scanned this map for the synapse that controlled the pulse rate. It located it and locked on. Cam's energy raced in to this focus point and raised the beat instantly.

The blip on the oscilloscope registered this with cold objectivity. It began to hurry. Tautz's tight, hairy face became even tighter. He fought back against this intimate assault with all his will, until his pulse rate leveled off, but at a faster rhythm.

"Good, Cameron, good," Dr. Ruth said breathlessly. "Faster, now. Faster!"

Cam nodded. Now that he had found the pressure point he could concentrate all his force at ease. The circuit from spine root to iris was open and flowing strongly. It drew upon a deep resource of power. It drew upon its own sense of being intensely alive.

Yes, I am alive, now, Cam thought, and an extra thrilling jolt surged from his eyes.

It rocked Tautz to his roots. The master began to pant, then gasp. His eyes flicked open in panic. His pupils were out on stalks. Behind him, the monitors impartially registered the wildness of his heart and Alpha waves.

Cam's eyes were shining. They were cold as snake's eyes. They were potent.

"Stop!" Tautz grunted. "Please—"

"Cameron," Ruth said at once. "End your scan. Now."

But Cam did not seem to hear the order. The force was too heady within him. It was orgasmic. It throbbed his whole body. It was too strong.

The electronic monitors were going berserk. The blips seemed to be trying to burst free of the screens. Tautz was turning purple in the face. He squealed like a tortured chimpanzee and flung himself back on the mat, legs jerking spasmodically.

"Vale!" Ruth shouted.

The doctor jumped up, jerked the little black case from his pocket, fumbled for the hypodermic. He grabbed Cam's left hand and plunged the needle into his thumb.

Cam relaxed at once. Almost casually, he released the writhing master from his scan. He turned his face up to the doctor and smiled, like a good boy.

Across the mat two assistants were sweating to save the master's life. They tore open his shirt and hit him with the heart energizer. The oscilloscope heart blip, which had died, made a tiny leap. They gave Tautz another jolt and the monitor began to register a pulse.

A technician put a rubber wedge in Tautz's mouth so he would not bite off his tongue. They covered the little man with a blanket, released him from his electrodes, and carried him gently from the room.

Dr. Ruth was staring down at Cam. He seemed hypnotized, almost frightened. Cam smiled back up at his mentor serenely.

"You see, Doctor," he murmured, "it was easy."

• 5 •

"Cameron," Dr. Ruth said, "you are the only scanner alive with the talent to take out Revok."

"What do you want me to do?" Cam asked humbly.

The doctor took Cam's arm and led him to a wallboard on which were pinned clippings and photos. The pictures were all of one face. It was rough and wild, scrubbily bearded, desperate. The eyes were haunted, especially in a prison mug shot, full face and profile.

The heading of one newspaper clipping read, "Benjamin Pierce: Attempted Murder."

"This is our only lead to Revok," the doctor explained. "Benjamin Pierce."

"Also, a—like me?" Cam asked.

"A scanner, yes. These photos here—" he tapped the wallboard —"are the last known record of the man. They were taken at a prison for the criminally insane."

"Insane?" Cam blinked. The unasked question in his head was: are all of us insane?

Ruth singled out a photo of a sculpted head. "This is also Pierce. It's a plaster cast of him which is currently on display at a place called The Crostic Art Gallery."

"Why was he in prison?"

"He tried to murder his entire family—father, mother, sister—when he was ten years old. He was released from custody two years ago. 'Rehabilitated through art therapy,' was the official statement."

Ruth's voice was dry, toneless. Cam could not fathom his feelings.

"Art therapy?" he murmured wonderingly.

"Art," the doctor said flatly.

Ruth led Cam away from the wallboard. He sat him on a metal chair, and drew another up close.

"Pierce was discovered at a prison art show by an international promoter. What began as art therapy became a real career. He made a name. Interested critics and admirers all over the world demanded his release and they got it. I have a few of Pierce's lithographs myself. They are works of genius, and madness."

"And he's a scanner?"

“A very gifted one. He may or may not be part of Revok’s conspiracy.”

“And you want me—”

“I want you to find him. That won’t be easy. No one knows where he hides himself. The location of his studio is a mystery.”

“So how will I—”

“Through the Crostic Gallery. You’ll pose as a wealthy art connoisseur, a possible client. If Crostic won’t give you Pierce’s address, you can scan it from his mind.”

“Me a wealthy whatsit?” Cam giggled.

“Yes.” Ruth’s face was wooden. “We’ll fit you up with a new persona. You’ll have good clothes, money, credit cards—the works. You’ll become Cameron Vale, art connoisseur.”

“Gee.” Cam smiled. “Good clothes?”

“Then you’ll do it?” Ruth asked, his voice trembling a little.

This tremor in the doctor’s voice gave Cam pause. All at once he understood that this was no game.

“Doctor—”

“Call me Paul.”

“Paul, I don’t think . . .”

“You’re scared?”

“Yes.”

“Quite right.”

Ruth smiled suddenly. Cam was disconcerted. There was such open feeling in the doctor’s smile; a tenderness, almost. Cam’s own heart softened.

“I—I’ll try.”

“Good man,” Ruth said, nodding.

“You think I can?”

“It was easy,” Ruth mocked lightly.

“But that was—well, it was here, with you. Out there I’d be on my own. Out there I’m nobody.”

Ruth shook his head. “Not any more. Now you know who you are.”

“What’s that?”

“A scanner.”

“Oh.”

“A scanner is not nobody, Cameron. A scanner is a quite extraordinary person. You know that, at least, surely?”

“I— Yes.”

Ruth leaned forward intently. Once again Cam felt all the man’s

weight on him.

"Listen to me. You find Pierce. You tell him you're lost and you want to join Revok. And when you find Revok, you join him. All you have to do then is tell me where Revok is. Then you can go home."

"Home?" Cam blurted. "Where's that?"

"Why, wherever you want it to be," Ruth said, surprised.

With you, Cam wanted to say. *Please?* But he just nodded.

"Okay. If that's what you want."

Ruth nodded emphatically. "That's what I want."

Lying in his new bed in an elegant room in a downtown hotel later that night, Cam turned over in his mind all the extraordinary events of the past forty-eight hours.

The sheets were crisp and smelled faintly of lavender. The dense carpets and thick curtains and solid cream walls made the still air absolutely silent. He was more comfortable and clean than he could ever remember having been in all his years. An excellent meal of roast beef gurgled in his bulging belly.

Yet, all said and done, he would have preferred another night in his little white cot at the warehouse with Paul Ruth's presence close by.

And there were so many impressions, so many images, so many questions.

Why was the gentle doctor so sad?

Why was this Revok fellow so angry with the world?

Why had poor Ben Pierce tried to kill his family when he was only ten years old?

"People are so strange," Cam said aloud.

The faces—Ruth, Revok, Pierce—flashed like a neon-lit triptych in his head. He couldn't make sense of it. It made hot holes in his brain.

Finally, in the early hours, conscious of all that was expected of him now, he submerged his confusions in weary sleep.

The Arno Crostic Gallery was in the trendiest part of town. An old Victorian Gothic townhouse had been gutted and turned into a mini-palazzo of plate glass and deep pile broadloom. The atmosphere was of art as *haute couture;* a shrewd, sophisticated marketing of culture as high fashion.

Cam made his way through the flock of Ferraris and Mercedes barricading the gallery. The brightness and buzz of a vernissage guided him. A discreet placard in the gallery's shopwindow

announced: Benjamin Pierce: Recent Works. Cam approached the front door—which was solid oak set capriciously in a cliff of glass—drawn by all the glitter of a fashionable opening-night party.

He felt both very confident and rather a fraud in his brand-new, expensive, three-piece dark blue pinstripe. To a casual observer, he might seem to be an affluent young man about town; a rising stockbroker, perhaps, or a successful architect on his way up. A certain nervous sensitivity around the eyes and mouth would suggest an artistic streak. Or perhaps just the tensions of intense ambition?

But for Cam this tenseness was generated by a fear that people might spot him for a phony. Since he could read others' minds so easily, he believed they could just as simply see through his pretense. Yet as soon as he plunged into the noisy throng filling the spaces between Pierce's sculptures he was reassured.

Everyone in that plush, tasteful space seemed to be in a conspiracy to take one another at face value. Cam sensed at once that it would be thoroughly bad manners to challenge anyone's bright façade. Everyone was so well dressed and cheerful, so high on his own *thereness,* it was all but impossible to be found out.

This was going to be fun!

At least, Cam thought so until he saw the works of art.

The first one he encountered face to face in that trendy swirl was of a man in a glass room strapped to a chair and screaming. The face of the tortured human being in the chair was that of Ben Pierce.

Cam stood and gaped.

The glass of sherry and the canapé a waiter had put into his hand seemed to belong to another order of existence. These civilized details were as out of place before that searing image of suffering as they would have been in Auschwitz.

Cam could not bear it. He felt like a tourist in hell. More than anything, he was astounded.

How could all the people in the room be so cheerful? How could they not see what Pierce was shoving right into their faces? Surely they should be terrified, or at least upset? Outraged, even, that this artist should thrust such terror into their lives?

But no, these bright people had some extraordinary capacity for not seeing. Or rather, for seeing terror as art. What a clever sleight of mind, Cam mused, flicking his gaze from the screaming fiberglass man to the buzzing patrons of art. What a clever trick!

"Rehabilitated through art therapy." This soothing formula replayed itself in Cam's head like an endless tape.

"The man has incredible power," a smooth voice said in his ear.

Cam jumped. He lurched back a pace, taking in the plump, shrewd face of a balding short man beside him.

"Power?" Cam croaked. "Yes."

The bald man put out his hand. "I'm Arno Crostic. Pleased you could attend our opening, Mr.—"

"Vale. Cameron Vale," Cam replied, recovering somewhat. He grasped the offered palm as if it were a lifebelt. It was reassuringly thick and fleshy.

"Do I know you, sir?" Crostic wondered, sizing up Cam discreetly.

Cam released the gallery owner's hand. "I don't think so. I flew in from Montreal," he added, suddenly remembering his 'cover.' "Just to be here tonight."

The small man's bushy eyebrow shot up. "You're an aficionado of Ben Pierce's work?"

"I've been following his career for years," Cam said jerkily. But it was all coming back to him now. He could hear Paul Ruth's voice reciting his instructions. "I thought it was time I met him. Is he here tonight?"

Crostic looked surprised. "Surely, if you're a fan of Ben's, you must know he never appears in public?"

"Well, of course—" Cam gestured vaguely.

"I am his agent as well as his exhibitor, and *I* have never met him, you know! Pierce is that rare thing, a genuinely mysterious personage."

"Really?" Cam said, fascinated. "You've never met him?"

"Never."

Crostic shook his neckless cannonball of a skull with what almost seemed to be satisfaction. "Never!"

"Well," Cam murmured, gesturing at the screaming man as casually as he could manage, "I'm interested in buying this for my home in Paris. But I don't know . . ." he added, getting into his "serious art patron's" role. "Would it really work out unless I met Pierce?"

"I understand," Crostic agreed instantly. Cosseting the fine sensitivities of the rich was familiar territory to him. "It takes a very special kind of person to live with a Pierce! You know, Mr. Vale," he added confessionally, "we seldom make private sales of a Pierce."

"The pictures are too scary?" Cam exclaimed.

"Too intense, rather," Crostic retorted creamily. "I mean to say, they could hardly be treated as decor, what?" he added, and winked.

Cam stared at the gallery owner. Was this man in on the conspiracy? Was he, perhaps, a scanner?

At this moment Cam could not bear to know. “Could you possibly arrange a meeting?” he pressed, still trying for an opening on the “normal” plane.

Crostic faked a profound sigh. “I’m afraid not. I hope it won’t influence your judgment, but you must understand that I would lose Ben for good if I even so much as suggested such a thing. It’s the basis of our contract. Pierce will not meet his public.”

“Maybe you could just sort of tell me where he lives?” Cam said slyly. “I could approach him myself. You wouldn’t be involved.”

“I’m sorry, but no.” Crostic laughed heartily. “Whatever would you think of me if I betrayed my client’s instructions?”

It was while Crostic was indulging his phony chuckle that Cam hit him with the scan. The energy leaped from his abruptly concentrated gaze to focus on Crostic’s brow like a beam of light intensified by a magnifying glass. All at once, Crostic felt confused. Blood trickled from his left nostril as Cam plucked the information he required from the bald man’s brain.

“Excuse me,” Crostic mumbled. He touched the back of his hand to his nose, smearing blood over his plump barbered and cologned cheek. “I don’t feel too well. Lack of air—”

Cam smiled politely. He had the fact he needed: Pierce’s location. He let Crostic go.

Cam turned to go himself. He felt exhausted all at once, and a trifle self-disgusted for some reason. Also he felt a little queasy.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the plate glass window of the gallery that the darkness outside had turned into a mirror. He blinked.

His own nose was bleeding!

This could only mean one thing: he was being scanned.

He raked the room with both eyes and mind. All his sharpened senses ran over the warm bodies and brains busy in the gallery.

An image flashed into his head. It came and went quickly, as if it had been deliberately rubbed out, but it was indelible in his memory.

A dark female face; intense black eyes, ravaged yet tender; a certain elegance of distress—

That was it.

Cam dabbed his bleeding nose with his handkerchief and pushed his way out into the open air.

• • •

Back in the safe anonymity of his hotel room, Cam inhaled deep snorts of Ephemerol and held the phone to his ear, anxiously waiting for the

ringing to be answered.

“Cameron?”

The deep paternal voice was there immediately the ringing stopped. This number was their exclusive means of contact and comfort.

“Paul!”

“Are you all right, my boy?”

“Sure, Doc,” Cam said, trying for levity. “Just a bit freaked at being on the loose again, and in disguise.”

“You look very handsome,” the doctor’s voice chuckled in Cam’s ear.

“Still, it’s a bit scary,” Cam admitted. “But I have Pierce’s location.”

“That’s excellent, Cameron! Cameron, are you all right? You sound a bit—”

“I’ve been scanned!” Cam blurted.

“Are you sure?” Ruth asked sharply. “Of course you’re sure. How could you be mistaken about that? Any idea who?”

“No,” Cam said. He didn’t know why he lied; it was an impulse.

“This is worrying,” Ruth’s voice worried.

“Maybe it was Pierce’s art,” Cam joked, needing now to reassure Ruth. “It’s very weird stuff.”

“Isn’t it?” Ruth agreed. “Quite extraordinarily forceful.”

This comment gave Cam pause. It reminded him that there were certain nuances that the doctor, no matter how scientifically knowledgeable, could never really comprehend. He simply could not feel them.

“Extraordinarily forceful,” Cam imitated, beginning to learn to take refuge behind abstractions.

“Goodnight, Cameron. Report in when you’ve made contact with Pierce. Good work, my boy.”

“Night, Paul,” Cam said brightly, and put down the phone.

Later that night, at their usual place on the subway platform, Keller met Revok.

“Vale’s located Pierce,” Keller said at once.

Revok cursed softly, viciously, under his breath. “Where?” he ended curtly.

“No idea. He didn’t say.”

“You’re monitoring Ruth?”

“Round the clock. Even have his wet dreams on tape,” Keller joked.

Revok was not amused. His profile sharpened in the half light.

"We must take him out."

"Vale?"

"Pierce."

"You want me—"

"No. Go back to the wet dreams," Revok said, and laughed.

• • •

Pierce's studio was a deserted farm several hours' drive north of the city. The main structure was a huge stone-and-board barn now well on the way to total collapse.

Vale's rented car followed the rutted tracks through overgrown weeds and neglected cornstalks. The map in Cam's head, plucked whole from Crostic's, led him toward the dilapidated barn building. He pushed the car as far as it could penetrate the underbush, then stopped and walked the rest of the way, across a muddy field. He pulled the plush camelhair coat collar tight about his throat for warmth against the raw November cold.

He did not notice the van that had followed him from town. It was black and carried five hard men as passengers. The van pulled over a hundred yards or so behind Cam's car. The driver climbed onto the hood and, through a pair of racing glasses, watched Cam approach the barn. He nodded to the others. At this signal, they took shotguns and automatic riles from the back of the van and spread out into the fields. They encircled the barn, crouching low, cradling their weapons.

The barn's wide doors were open despite the cold. As Cam entered he heard mice scuttling and swallows swooping to their nests in the rafters.

The inside of the crumbling rustic structure was like an abandoned museum of torture.

Half-made sculptures of the same tormented, terrorized kind as Cam had seen in the Crostic Gallery littered the straw-strewn floor. Incomplete they seemed even more hideous. Arms were missing, eyes were undone, lumps were chopped out of the contorted victims lying about casually in the vast barn. Yet here they seemed curiously at home, like images in some giant's head. Half-completed thoughts in the mind of a monstrous genius.

They were all sizes and scales. The smallest was a full-length nude only nine inches high of a pregnant woman with her gut ripped open. The largest was an immense head ten feet wide lying on its cheek in the straw. Its mouth was red and filled with metallic maggots.

There was little sign of the imaginer of all these horrors, except for an empty glass of wine and a short, smoldering cigar on a worktable.

Cam was about to penetrate deeper into the recesses of the barn in search of Pierce, when a voice spoke up overhead.

“Why don’t you leave me alone?”

The tone was harsh. Cam stepped back a pace or two and craned upward. He saw a rough, wild-faced figure perched on a platform. Pierce wore a plaid shirt and a down vest. His face was obscured by a scrubby beard.

“Benjamin Pierce?” Cam said.

“Go away.”

“I need help. You’re the only one who can give it to me.”

“Me?” The laugh was brutal. “You must be joking. Help!”

“I’m getting a sore neck,” Cam complained.

“Come up if you must,” Pierce said grudgingly.

Cam climbed a ladder he found nearby. When his eyes rose level with the platform, he saw a kind of human nest.

Rough sacks were laid out on straw and molded into a sisal womb. Bits of cheese, crusts of bread, a clump of empty wine bottles were the only props. It smelled stale yet cozy, like a baby’s cot. There was an undertone of urine in the air.

Pierce looked as if he hadn’t stood up for a week. He was propped with his head against a wooden post chewing on a dead cigar. His eyes were utterly inward. They hadn’t looked outward in a long time. They were dead black rubber balls in a thicket of reddish beard.

“If I’m your only hope, you’re in big trouble,” he said, as Cam squatted beside him on the straw.

Cam decided to be direct. It was the only way.

“You know Darryl Revok.”

The name made Pierce’s eyes dilate in shock. He jerked his limbs like a threatened rat.

“Who the hell are you?” he blurted.

Outside the barn the killers were closing in. They crept through the weeds and scrub, weapons at the ready. The place was encircled.

Cam glimpsed the attackers through a wide crack in the siding, over Pierce’s shoulder. He said nothing to the artist except, “My name is Cameron Vale.”

Pierce stood up abruptly. It was a clean movement for a man who had been comatose so long.

“You flew in from Montreal,” he said. “You have an apartment in Paris.”

Cam rose. Pierce began to descend the ladder. Cam followed him.

"How did you know that?" Cam asked.

Pierce stuck a fresh cigar in his mouth and struck a match.

"I have friends," he said. "I don't want them, but I have them."

"Scanner friends?"

Pierce paused in his puffing. He squinted at Cam through blue smoke.

"What's that?"

"I'm one of them," Cam said. "I want to join you."

"The hell you do," Pierce said, and laughed.

It was not a happy sound. Again, over Pierce's shoulder, Cam saw the killers closing in. They seemed to be in no hurry, as if they had all the time in the world and the leisure to savor what they were about to do.

"I know who your friend is," Cam said suddenly, as the image flashed into his head. "She's dark. Sad eyes. She scans."

"Kim," Pierce blurted out, and regretted it. He turned his back on Cam and strode toward the huge head lying on the straw. "There's only one of me," he flung over his shoulder. "You're nuts!"

"Don't tell me I'm crazy!" Cam shouted, suddenly angry.

Pierce turned to Cam, piqued. "No? Why not?" he asked softly.

Cam spoke rapidly, intently. "For years they called me crazy. Told me people can't live in my head. People do live here!" He banged his forehead vehemently. "They wipe their feet in my head. They cut their throats in my head. And yours, too, Pierce." Cam gestured fiercely around at the art work. "Don't tell me they don't!"

Pierce nodded with surprising calm. He rested a shoulder against the huge head's upper lip and crossed his arms. "They used to. I don't let them any more."

Cam was amazed, at first. Then, remembering, he laughed. "Rehabilitation through art therapy?"

Pierce froze. His eyes narrowed to hostile cracks in his red bush of a beard. "It's my art that keeps me sane," he said stiffly.

Cam curbed his mockery. If Pierce believed this, why challenge it? To recover the sympathy he felt he had been establishing with the artist, Cam said gently, "Your work has extraordinary force."

It was Pierce's turn to laugh. "That's a Crostical phrase. What do you really want from me, Vale?"

"Darryl Revok. I want to find him."

"Why?"

"I want to join him."

“Why?”

“I can’t take it alone any more. I have to find others like me.”

“Like you? Tell me, are you a zombie? A killer?”

“Huh?”

“Because if you aren’t, you won’t find others like you with Darryl Revok,” Pierce said crisply.

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re a lunatic and a liar. *Get out!”*

Pierce’s sudden scan hit Cam in the chest, throwing him backward, up against the barn wall.

At that moment the assassins struck.

Shotgun blasts and automatic fire from five weapons shattered Pierce and the huge head behind him. Both man and image seemed to disintegrate together in the racket.

The uproar jolted Cam from his trance. Instantly he concentrated his force. He focused on each killer in turn.

One thug flew through the air, crashed into the barn wall and dropped to the straw like a smashed rag doll.

Another’s head split like a ripe melon.

Two others turned their shotguns to their own middles and blew their guts out.

The fifth simply twisted into a flesh-and-blood parody of one of Pierce’s most tormented images. He froze there, a scream locked in his teeth.

Cam rushed to Pierce.

The artist was dying. His eyes were lifeless planets.

But there was still a trace of brain function. Cam scanned it greedily and sucked out the information he needed. It told him where to go next.

Cam dropped Pierce among his sculptures.

He walked out of the barn without a backward glance.

• 6 •

There was a package waiting for Cam that evening at the hotel desk when he returned to the city.

Ephemerol.

Dr. Ruth had promised him a steady supply. Cam hurried to his room, tore off his coat and jacket, rolled up his shirtsleeve, primed the syringe and hit a vein with a heavy shot of the pale blue chemical.

He needed it.

Too many images were crowding his mind. Too many questions were hammering in his head. The miraculous liquid soothed them out like a cool hand on a fevered brow.

Ephemerol.

Cam lazed in a hot tub and let the questions stroll casually ihrough his consciousness.

How had Paul Ruth come across this amazing drug? Why had he started to specialize in the phenomenon of scanners? What was this organization—ConSec—he was working for? What were they after?

The track switched to Pierce.

Who had murdered the artist . . . Revok? If so, why? If Pierce wasn't Revok's man, or ConSec's, whose man was he?

Kim's?

The image he had vampired from Pierce's dying brain was of a stark white doorway in a wet black street. Cam knew exactly where it was located in the city. And overprinted was that ravaged female face with the sad black eyes.

Kim.

Who was she?

So many questions.

But these were real questions. Hard questions. Not soft ones, like "Why is Revok so angry with the world?"

In the last few hours Cam had grown up fast. He had to, to survive. Things were a damn sight more tricky than he ever imagined.

This insight galvanized him. He rose from the tub and rapidly dressed. Thirty minutes later he was walking down that wet black street.

The stark white doorway was there, exactly as he had scanned it

from Pierce's head.

Cam knocked. After a moment the door opened a crack and a sharp, suspicious young man's face was inserted in the tight gap.

"I want to see Kim," Cam said at once.

The young man's eyes sharpened in a way Cam recognized. He let himself be scanned, thinking about Ben Pierce and his death, feeding it to the face in the door crack.

"Oh God—Ben," the young man sobbed suddenly, breaking off the scan.

Cam nodded. "Dead."

The face vanished. A chain was released. The door opened wide and Cam went through.

The interior of the house was warm and cozy. Cam followed the young man up the stairs. They entered a living room of what seemed to be a sort of commune. The furniture was comfortable and shabby. There were anti-nuke posters on the walls.

The young man gestured at Cam to wait. He went through a doorway and Cam could hear whisperings. He edged forward a step or two and saw Kim.

She had her back to Cam. All he could see was a rough white woolly sweater and the ends of a long scarf wrapped around her throat and trailing over her shoulders.

She was sitting on the edge of a couch bending over a supine male body. The young man on the couch seemed to be in pain. His body jerked, his fists clenched and released spasmodically. Kim spoke to him urgently, intimately, in a low, warm, gentle voice that was also full of firmness.

Cam understood at once what the sufferer's problem was—too many voices. Not all the sympathy in the world could stop them jabbering in one's head. There was only one release: Ephemerol. Cam could almost feel it running in his own veins.

The young man who had let Cam into the house was whispering in Kim's ear. Cam saw her turn and glance at him over her sweatered shoulder.

The eyes. Black. Intense. Charged with sadness.

Cam felt them upon him like fingers probing his heart. He let them probe.

At last Kim nodded. She rose from her mission of mercy at the couch and walked up to Cam. He noticed that her figure was straight and lithe, graceful in a slightly artificial sort of way, as if she'd been taught to walk correctly. Perhaps she'd been a model once, in a previous era. He noticed, too, that her dark hair was streaked with

blonde, and that her voice had a touch of tutored elegance in it as she said: “I know you.”

Cam nodded. “Yes.”

“You were at the gallery. You were hunting Pierce. Why?”

“I need help.”

It was odd the way Cam said this. It was his cover story, that he was seeking help. He’d used it with Pierce. Now, however, he meant it. Realizing this, he blinked.

“Help,” he repeated.

“Who sent you to Pierce?”

The black eyes were hard upon his heart. Cam could not lie to them. Fortunately, he didn’t have to.

“Come and meet Tony,” Kim said abruptly.

She led him into the living room. A lean, olive-skinned young man was sitting at a dining table. He glanced up tensely as they entered, instantly alert.

“Tony, this is . . .”

“Cameron Vale,” Cam supplied.

“He saw Ben die.”

The man’s eyes flared. “How did they—”

“Shotguns. Rifles. Five of them blasted him.”

“Revok,” Kim said flatly.

She pulled out a chair. She and Cam sat down.

“I scanned them,” Cam said. “They didn’t block me. They couldn’t have been scanners.”

“Revok’s people use a drug called ‘Ephemerol,’” Kim said. “They can’t scan, so they use guns.”

“Ephemerol?” Cam blinked.

“We don’t use it,” Tony said curtly. “It’s addictive. It’s hard to get. And it weakens you.”

“Surely—” Cam blurted, and bit his lip. A shiver ran down his spine.

“Ephemerol is a dependency drug,” Kim explained. “It’s a form of mind control. We try to live without it. It’s hard sometimes. You saw that poor boy on the couch back there.”

“Then why does Revok feed it to his people?” Cam asked. His mind was racing. “Why does Paul Ruth feed it to me?”

“That’s quite a story,” Tony said, and let out a grim chuckle.

The black van rolled into the alleyway. The side door opened and Revok stepped out.

He stood in the shadows of the wet black street and watched the stark white door. His eyes were hard as stones.

Bodies stirred in the van beside him. He tapped on the metal, rapping it once with his knuckles, lightly.

The back door swung wide. Two men slipped out.

The black man had a shaven, gleaming skull. The white man wore a Castro cap and battledress tunic. Both carried guitar cases.

Revok nodded toward the white doorway. The two "musicians" strode off down the street.

"Let me tell you about Darryl Revok," Kim was saying. "The first we knew of him was his escape from a mental institution when he was twenty-three. That was just after he'd invented the word 'scanner.' "

"He invented it?" Cam interjected.

"He did. It defined him, gave him strength and purpose."

"How powerful words are," Cam said, and shuddered.

"It's names," Tony cut in. "Give something a name and it becomes a weapon."

"He knew there were others like him. He knew about us," Kim went on. "He knew we were hidden. Crazy. Garbage. He found us. He told us we were special people. He told us we were scanners . . ."

Her eyes darkened with suppressed tears. "We thought he was a saint," she said, so softly Cam could hardly hear her.

"He's the devil," Tony spat out. "Satan!"

"Oh come on, Tony," Kim protested. "There's no such creature as Satan! Only a lapsed Catholic like you—"

"Only a woolly Protestant like you pretends there's no such thing as pure evil," Tony shot back contemptuously. "And in the twentieth century!"

"You thought Revok was a saint?" Cam put in.

"Yes." Kim nodded vehemently. "The very first scanner saint. He told us we were valuable, you see. He told us we were special, not human trash as all the others claimed. We adored him. We loved him."

"Yeah," Tony said grimly. "We loved him." His tawny profile was bitter.

"He didn't lie to us, not at first," Kim went on. It seemed she had to unburden all of this, now she was launched upon it. "He told us we were sterile, for instance, that we couldn't have children even with 'normals.' And when we were unhappy on that account, he smiled and told us that emphasized our uniqueness. We couldn't be replaced.

More than that, we were the world's one hope of salvation."

"And we bought it all, hook, line and sinker," Tony said. "Poor sad little rejects that we were."

"Yes," Kim said. "We believed."

"Our fake messiah. Jesus of the Scanners," Tony muttered. "Or our Hitler, offering the despised ones glory."

"And then Revok brought us Ephemerol," Kim said faintly.

"Ephemerol!" Tony exclaimed. "A miracle drug that could make us *normal* for hours at a stretch! Could kill the voices! Incredible. It was like—" Tony broke off, searching for a metaphor to express the liberation from the burden of scanning. "Like waking up one morning to find you could really fly!"

"Fly . . ." Kim echoed.

A silence.

Cam's own head was crowded with so many questions he didn't know where to begin unraveling the tangled skein.

"And then?" he asked, finally. "What?"

"Cameron," Kim said, "have you ever sat in a room with other scanners before?"

"Er—no," Cam replied, surprised at the discovery. "Why?"

"The group self. Several minds scanning together, becoming one force, one nervous system, one energy, one soul . . . it's beautiful. And frightening."

"Must be!" Cam exclaimed, and meant it.

"It really is scary," Tony said, taking up the theme. "You lose yourself, submerge your will in the group and quantify your power. Yes, my friend, the power a small number of us can generate when we focus our scan simultaneously is terrifying!"

"But uncontrollable," Kim put in.

"By one will, that is," Tony clarified. "Revok's!"

The two "musicians" carrying guitar cases slipped down a lane beside the house. They found a side door. Springing the lock was the work of a moment. Then they vanished into the house.

"Revok's ego was too selfish," Kim said. "We all wanted to explore the group self, the pooling of our separate scans, but he wanted to dominate. He wanted control. We couldn't let him have it, no matter how much we admired him. So he left."

"Alone?" Cam asked.

"Pierce went with him," Tony said. "He refused to believe Revok was demented. He wouldn't see that Revok wanted power, that he was bitter, angry at the Creator—a kind of fallen Lucifer . . ."

"Poor man," Kim said.

Tony ignored her. "Finally even Ben saw what was what. He ran away. That's when Revok started to kill us."

"Did Pierce come back here?" Cam wondered, remembering the lonely figure in the barn.

"We wanted him to," Kim said sadly. "But he couldn't stand to be with anyone. He tried to forget he was a scanner. He tried to be an artist, pure and simple. He rejected all of us, along with Revok. He tried to escape into art."

"Poor man," Kim said again.

"Oh stop that," Tony said irritably. "No good wallowing in compassion! We've got to fight back, or sit here till he blows us all away."

"I have friends. I don't want them, but I have them."

Kim and Tony stared at Cam. He had spoken with Pierce's voice!

"It's my art that keeps me sane."

"Oh God!" Kim gasped. She buried her face in her hands.

Cam shook himself, coming out of the trance. "I—I scanned him as he was dying. Still have a trace." He was very embarrassed. "Sorry," he said, reaching out to Kim.

Kim recoiled. "Don't touch me!"

Cam flushed. Her reaction was so visceral he felt he was polluted. She saw this and softened a little.

"I loved Ben," she said simply.

Tony leaned forward urgently. "Listen! If Cameron here will participate in a group scan . . ."

Kim nodded eagerly. "We could share what traces he has of Ben." She turned to Cam eagerly. "Would you? Please?"

Cam nodded. "Sure." Whatever doubts he had were obscured by her anticipation.

Tony rose. "I'll call the others."

The "musicians" paused on the second-floor landing to open their guitar cases. Inside each velvet-lined case was a sawed-off shotgun.

The black man tucked his weapon under his arm. The white man carried his cocked. They moved silently toward a half-open door.

Tony returned with four more scanners. They sat around the table with Kim and Cam.

Kim explained the group scan technique to Cam.

“We begin by everyone’s recollecting the images of his recent past,” she said. “Just relax and let the images in your head surface themselves. You’ll see that gradually a communal image begins to emerge, a fusion of all the energies present in the room. The individual minds become subordinate to it. The sum is greater than the parts. Do you see?”

Cam nodded, though he wasn’t quite sure he understood. He trusted this dark-eyed woman—not in the naive way he’d first had faith in Paul Ruth, but more soberly, with greater intelligence. It was important to keep on trusting, he knew, but you didn’t have to be foolish about it.

Everyone fell silent. The young people in the room breathed deeply and each sank into his own headspace.

Cam took a little longer to settle than the others. Two observations distracted him. First: everyone in the room was about the same age, about five years younger than he. Second: all scanners had the same kind of look: a certain strangeness in the eyes, a kind of vagueness.

The scanner look.

Once you noticed it, it was instantly recognizable. These people—his kind—were not quite of this world. It was unsettling. It made you very vulnerable.

He remembered something he’d seen in a book at some time—a saying, “Character is fate.” And his fate was scanning.

There was a strange sound in the room now, a scanning tone. It began to revolve around the minds seated about the table like a traveling hum. It accelerated from brain to brain, gathering speed as it flew.

Random images began to flash, inspirations from each consciousness present. The scan tone revolved faster and faster, skewering the individual flashes, linking them like beads on a string. The electricity was vibrant.

Cam’s neck loosened. His head began to loll as his mind dissolved into the group will. His breath quickened. He felt his heart hammering in his ribcage.

For an instant he was terrified. He had never experienced such energies as were present in that room.

What if his separate self melted into the communal nervous system irretrievably?

What if the other scanners were ganging up on him, were in a plot

to suck his brain dry as he had vampired Pierce?

Revenge?

After all, he was the outsider here. And he'd admitted scanning the last shreds of sentience from a man they'd once loved.

But search as he might, he could locate no enmity from this group.

On the contrary, a wave of tenderness flowed to him, an acceptance. For the first time in his life, Cam felt *accepted.*

He smiled. A flash of loving energy leaped from his mind into the communal pool. He was at peace. He belonged.

On the landing outside the room in which the scanners were holding their séance, another scanner encountered the two killers.

He walked out of a door and saw the armed men. Before he could scan them, the black man smashed him across the face with his gun butt. Both killers grabbed his ankles and heaved him over the banister.

"Let's hit the bastards!" the white killer hissed, running at the door to the séance room.

In the room, a communal image was just beginning to emerge.

Cam sensed it like a shadow hovering on the edges of his mind. It was like finding a father after a lifetime of being an orphan. It was home. It was—

At that moment the killers burst into the room.

The first blast smashed two of the scanners in the chest. They were knocked backward off their chairs, blood spurting from their torn flesh. The black man aimed his shotgun at Tony, but in his haste he missed and blew out the window instead. Tony ducked under the table quick as a flash.

Two more scanners were destroyed with the next blasts. They seemed to disintegrate into a bloody mass in a roar of thunder. The killers were smashing them all.

But all the while the scan was humming. Cam felt his mind tugged into violence by a stronger will. The high tone zoomed, aimed at the white-faced murderer in the Castro cap.

It swung the assassin like a top. His gun still blasted, tearing gaps in the ceiling plaster, that rained down upon them all. He spun so fast his eyeballs popped. He fell to the floor in a melted lump.

The black killer was hit simultaneously. Flames leaped out of his mouth. His tongue turned to hot syrup and dribbled down his chin. His shining ebony skull was a living torch.

"Run!" a voice screamed.

Cam obeyed. He followed two blurred figures out of the door as the


room caught fire.

• 7 •

In an instant, it seemed, the whole house was ablaze.

It was like someone setting fire to a bundle of dry sticks. Walls of flame shot up on all sides as Cam and Kim scuttled after Tony's hunched, urgent back.

The flight seemed to go on endlessly. Fists of heat punched Cam in the face from all sides as they ran down stairs and along corridors. The air was suffocatingly smoky. Several times Cam just wanted to lie down and die, but Kim, sensing this, turned around and urged him on with a flash of her eyes. Toward the end it was no longer a matter of saving his life so much as not letting Kim down that kept Cam's feet moving.

And then, suddenly, they were free.

The cold night air was iron in the lungs. They lurched out into a yard at the back of the house. Cam was momentarily blinded; the crisp darkness was too dense to penetrate after the intensities of light generated by the fire. He felt himself being thrown through a hole in the blackness, to land on his hands and knees on a metallic floor. The floor moved forward and Cam was hurled full length.

Kim's hands eased him upright. Kim's voice reassured.

"Cameron, steady. It's okay. We're safe."

The scene came slowly into focus. Cam saw that he was in the back of an old school bus. He recognized the bright yellow of the paintwork from his childhood. Kim was beside him. Tony was driving. As the bus screeched away around a corner, Cam caught a last glimpse of the house being swallowed by orange flames.

"Safe!" Tony echoed sardonically. He adjusted the driving mirror to get Cam into focus as the bus sped through the black wet streets. "Who the hell are you, Vale?" he demanded.

"Pardon?" Cam said stupidly, still in a state of shock.

"Everywhere you go, somebody dies!" Tony accused.

"Tony—" Kim cut in soothingly.

"I'm a scanner," Cam mumbled.

"I know *what* you are," Tony snapped. "What I want to know is, *who* you are!"

"Drive carefully," Kim said, as the school bus swerved around a corner.

Cam held on to the rail of the seat in front to stop himself from being thrown forward.

"ConSec found me," he blurted.

"ConSec?" Kim exclaimed.

Cam stared at her shocked face. His heart sank. "Are they—"

"Fascists!" Tony shouted. "What are they up to now? What do they want you for?"

Cam steadied himself as the bus teetered around yet another corner. He tried to speak calmly.

"There's this doctor . . . Ruth. Paul Ruth. He told me to find Revok. Told me he was evil. He didn't tell me anything about you."

There was a silence in the bus. Kim and Tony seemed to be chewing over this information.

Tony calmed down visibly as he digested it. His tensed shoulders, jerked up high, began to relax. He eased the speed of the bus till it was cruising evenly through the late-night traffic of a downtown boulevard.

Cam felt a hand light upon his own. It was cool and firm as it squeezed.

"You've been used," Kim murmured. Her voice was gentle with sympathy.

"Down!" Tony yelled. *"Down!"*

The extreme panic in his yell made Cam and Kim hit the floor instantly. As he lunged forward, Cam had a glimpse of the high side of a glistening black van. It was a yard or so away from the school bus windows. Small tongues of flame were leaping from its darkness.

Shotgun blasts!

Glass exploded in a shower of splinters. The floor on which Cam was huddled rose up at forty-five degrees to the horizontal. The tires shrieked *"Down! down! down!"* till Cam realized it was Tony's scream.

Then, from Cam's view, they were rushing at a high wall of light. The bus hit it with the sound of a fist smacking iron. The "wall" disintegrated in jagged shards of silver as the bus smashed through the plate-glass window of a brightly lit record store.

Cam, peering over the edge of the front seat, gripping the iron rail for dear life, saw through the wide windshield their progress through the store.

It was a moment in time not so much frozen as slow motioned.

Very slowly the blunt nose of the bus plowed its iron way through record stacks and shop counters. Bright LP sleeves curved up into the air like decks of oversize playing cards. Tape decks and transistor

radios curled away like a wake on either side of the projectile that was their bus. The big yellow bullet gouged its way through oceans of entertainment before coming to a stop with a surprisingly gentle thump against the far wall.

Silence.

Cam became aware of Tony's eyes staring at him, close up. There was something odd about them, though. They were upside down.

"Tony?" he murmured.

"Tony!" Kim screamed, behind him.

Then, suddenly, Cam knew. "He's dead," he said.

"No," Kim gasped.

Cam crawled out of the bus through the gaping hole left by the shattered windshield. He saw Kim slither over the back of the front seat to cradle Tony's head in her arms.

There were tears in her eyes. She rocked back and forth with the dead man's head in her lap, keening and concentrating.

Cam became aware of a bunch of scared spectators gathering at the shattered store window. A siren moaned in the distance.

"Kim—" Cam urged.

Kim was rocking, rocking. Her eyes were screwed up tight. All at once Cam realized what she was doing with such fierce intent—scanning!

"But he's *dead!"* Cam shouted.

Kim seemed not to hear. Blood was trickling from the corpse's nose onto the lap of her woolen skirt.

Does the brain live on for moments after the heart stops?

Can you suck the last flashes of electrical activity from a dead head?

For an instant, Cam was hypnotized by these wild conjectures. Then he heard the sirens whooping close. A big red fire engine filled the open storefront.

Cam grabbed Kim's arm and dragged her from the bus. Her head was turned back like Lot's wife as he pulled her to the sanctuary of a back door.

Abruptly, the ruined store was jammed with bodies.

Police and firemen rushed about with great purpose, trailing hoses, controlling the crowds of fascinated ghouls that gather instantly at the scene of any urban disaster. Bullhorns blared, sirens whooped, voices yelled orders. It was a first-class uproar.

Actually, there was very little to be done. The yellow bus lay tranquilly on its side, one of its red rooflights winking. On its rear was a warning: "DO NOT PASS WHEN SIGNALS FLASHING." Tony's corpse hung

upside down, trapped by the knees. Gravity inverted his death grimace into a smile.

All at once, belatedly, the sprinkler system operated. Jets of water showered the ambulance men who were trying to push their way through cops and firemen and smashed records to rescue Tony from the bus. Their white coats turned gray in the artificial rain.

In a corner another figure was sprinkled. He wore an oversize khaki hunting jacket and a brown woolen seaman's cap. He was the only one to notice the open back door through which Cam and Kim had fled.

This man slipped through the door and found a flight of stairs leading down to a basement storeroom. He shut the door behind him and bolted it from the inside.

On the landing, he unzipped his jacket. A lightweight high-powered rifle, broken into several components, was taped to his canvas vest. He ripped the parts loose and locked them into place. He jammed a cartridge stem into the magazine. Armed and ready, he silently descended the stairs.

Cam and Kim were below, stumbling among boxes of records and tape decks. They found a way through this cardboard jungle to a small room at the rear.

Cam pulled Kim into a corner behind a stack of boxes. It was dark and eerily silent, remote from the chaos up above. The sirens and the uproar sounded as distant as echoes.

"We'll be safe here for a while," Cam murmured in her ear.

She turned to look at him. Her face was inches away, and stricken.

"Doesn't matter," she muttered.

"Pardon?"

"All over. Finished."

"What?"

"The dream."

Cam's knees felt weak suddenly. He sank down to his haunches; it seemed safer that way. Kim followed him down. Their bodies were jammed close in the dark crevice.

"Dream?" he murmured.

Her eyes were very black. They seemed stunned, like the eyes of heifers in a slaughterhouse when the electrocution slams them.

"Scanner's dream," she said, very softly. "A loving life, total empathy . . . linked minds sensitive to one another's every thought and feeling."

Cam stared at her. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. All at once he felt very old, much older than this hurt woman whose warm

body was pressed up against his own.

“It can still happen,” he said, more in hope than belief.

Kim shook her head. “No. It died with Tony. He was our core. Nothing can stop Revok now.”

“What does Revok want?” Cam said, with a spurt of irritation.

“We were the dream,” Kim said. “He is the nightmare.”

“But there’s still us,” Cam said lamely. “I can help. We can fight Revok together.”

Kim’s abrupt, savage laugh was a blow to the heart.

“You?” she cried. “You’re barely human!”

“That’s cruel!” Cam exclaimed.

Kim shook her head. “You understand nothing. Nothing.”

“Try me,” Cam challenged.

Kim’s tone softened. She pulled her side away from Cam, making a small gap.

“I’m sorry, Cameron, but I feel so alone, now . . . helpless. Hopeless.”

Impulsively, Cam hugged her. Whatever her opinion was of him, he felt strong, stronger than he’d ever felt in his life. The force of this certainty surprised him, but there was no time to question it.

It was time to act.

Cam saw, over Kim’s shoulder, the barrel of the high-powered rifle the man in the khaki hunting jacket and brown woolen cap was aiming at them from the middle of the stairway. He sensed the finger beginning to squeeze the trigger. He felt the coolness of the lightweight butt cradling the killer’s right cheek.

Instantly, his scan flashed out.

The assassin’s aim wavered. The barrel of the rifle began to wobble as if the man’s eyesight was double-focused. It was as if he could not concentrate upon his victims, as if they’d floated out of the gunsight.

The killer stumbled down the last few steps. He fell to his knees on the cement floor. Unaccountably, he began to weep.

What the hit man couldn’t know was that Cam had rerouted Kim’s despair through his nervous system. The killer was sobbing for Kim.

Kim laughed.

She understood at once. Cam was more powerful than she’d thought!

Cam rose and walked over to the wailing assassin. Kim followed him. Cam stood over the hunched man and scanned him fiercely.

“What are you doing?” Kim asked.

Cam replied tersely, over his shoulder. The man on his knees before

him was writhing in anguish.

"A lead to Revok."

Kim recoiled. "Not me," she exclaimed.

"Look," Cam pointed. "There it is!"

The unhappy man on the floor had pulled a small object out of an inner pocket. He held it up to Cam like an offering, a plea for relief from the ferocious scan.

Cam took it. It was a small vial of pale blue liquid.

"Ephemerol!" Cam explained. "This guy must be a doped-out scanner." He almost added: "Like me!"

He examined the vial. It had an abstract logo stamped on the glass, like a stylized chemical laboratory retort. Under it was printed a name: BIOCARBON-AMALGAMATE.

"Biocarbon-Amalgamate," Cam read out. "Do you know the name?"

Kim shook her head vehemently. "I don't want to know!"

Cam turned on her. "What?" he demanded.

"I don't care any more," Kim wailed.

Cam gripped her wrist and pulled her close till their eyes were no more than a foot apart.

"What will you do, Kim? Hide out? Bury yourself in some suburb, in some petty job, trying to pass for normal?" The contempt sharpened in his voice as Kim tried to pull away. "Revok will hunt you down. Revok will kill you! Better to die on your feet than live on your knees."

A wry, bitter smile twisted Kim's full red mouth.

"I've heard that one before."

Cam shook her. "The hell you have!"

Kim turned her head away. She mumbled, "Many suicides already . . ."

Cam laughed harshly. "And you called me barely human!"

Kim flushed. "But what can we do?"

"Scan this guy. Find out where Revok gets his supplies of Ephemerol, where this Biocarbon-Amalgamate place is. Then we'll follow the line all the way back to the devil himself."

Kim stared at him. "Can we?"

"Watch me!"

"Okay." Kim nodded jerkily. "All right. I want to stop Revok."

Cam smiled. He touched her cheek lightly with his fingertips. Kim smiled back, but painfully. Her eyes said, Please don't let me down. I couldn't bear it. Are you really human?

Cam turned on the huddled figure at his feet. He pulsed out a sharp scan. The killer's head snapped back. Cam plucked the information he needed from that captive brain and tossed the rest aside like a sucked orange.

Cam took Kim's hand. "Let's go," he said briskly. He led her out through a rear doorway into the night.

• 8 •

They spent the night in Cam's hotel room. Cam gave Kim the bed. He slept on the couch.

She fell asleep instantly, lying on her back like a figure carved on a tomb. Later, when Cam went over to check on her, he found Kim curled up on her side like a scared kid. Her cheek looked vulnerable and very young.

His own oblivion was slower in coming. There were too many things to process, too many ambiguities to unravel. Number One: was Revok trying to kill him?

If he was, he'd missed several easy opportunities. Pierce's barn, for instance. The killers hadn't taken one shot at him. The commune house where he'd found Kim. There the assassins were after Tony, not him. The record store basement. Did the gunman there want to blow him away, or only Kim?

Puzzling . . .

Was Revok using him as a stalking horse to track down all the wayward scanners?

Was Ruth in league with Revok?

This last inspiration made Cam sit up straight.

"No," he said out loud. "No!"

But the thought would not be erased once it was written in his mind. It left a smudge.

Cam fell back exhausted upon his pillow. His eyelids fluttered. He slept.

He woke early. He dressed quietly and slipped out of the room while Kim was still sleeping, leaving a note pinned to the door.

> Dear Kim,
>
> "Paying a visit to Biocarbon-Amalgamate. See you this evening.
>
> Love, Cameron."

It was a seemingly simple note, but it had cost sweat. Somehow, no matter how many drafts he made, he couldn't seem to strike the right note between intimacy and reserve, reassurance and condescension. There was so much he wanted to say. He himself didn't know the half of it. In the end he settled for terseness. It was a cop-out, he knew, but

what the hell.

• • •

The headquarters of Biocarbon-Amalgamate was about fifty miles along the lake.

The drive was pleasant, through sunny yet crisp fall landscapes of red maple leaves and crumbling sumacs. On his left the lake glittered like a sequined gown set out to dry. The sharp clear air was charged with that particular pathos of autumn and the death of summer's hopes.

But Cam's own hopes were up.

He couldn't have said why, exactly, but his heart was light. Perhaps it was sensing the ultimate enemy almost within his sights? The devil was coming into focus. Maybe it was another focus that made him whistle a tuneless air and tap the wheel of the rented car in rhythm as he sped along.

Whatever it was, he felt happy. *"Happy!"* he shouted at the sky, and immediately felt foolish.

Cam was sobered by his first sight of Biocarbon-Amalgamate. It was a sight to sober any man.

A high wall of raw concrete slabs topped with broken glass enclosed a compound of squat, windowless laboratory blocks. The studded steel gate was operated electronically by remote control. A complex series of personal codes had to be punched into a switch panel beside the gate before it swung away to permit entry. The same chemical-retort logo Cam had seen on the killer's phial was the only indication that this was indeed the headquarters of Biocarbon-Amalgamate.

Cam observed all this through binoculars from a side road several hundred yards from the building. He watched several cars enter, after their drivers had gotten out to punch in their codes. In the gaps when the gates were briefly open, Cam saw that there was a second line of electronic monitors beyond: what looked like photoelectric cells, laser sensors and other such sophisticated devices for screening out the unauthorized.

He got back in the car to think out how he might gain entry to this modern fortress.

It wasn't going to be easy.

It seemed almost impossible for him to get in in the flesh. He didn't know the codes. He had no idea of the procedures, even if he did manage to get through that formidable gate. He could be tripped up by some small error at any time. The interior of the laboratory-factory was a mystery to him. He had never seen such places in his life.

What to do?

Perplexed, Cam absently chewed the thumb of his leather glove. He knew it was vital to find out what was happening beyond that concrete wall. At one point he tried a scan, but it failed. There was no focus, no "nervous system" for him to hook into. All he got was a slight throb of the temples, the beginning of a headache.

In the meantime, cars were going in and out. The pale sun was rising higher in the rinsed blue heavens. Time was passing.

As he waited for an inspiration, Cam sank into a kind of reverie. For some reason he began to think of his childhood.

All he could remember of the years when he was growing up, through the confusion of his own deep sense of being odd, was a series of orphanages and foster homes. There were so many, he had been shifted about so frequently, he could not remember any of the faces of the surrogate parents who had taken care of him when he was a child.

Why had he been moved so often? "I guess I was too weird," he mused aloud. Too strange for any adult to put up with him for long.

He remembered one voice saying to someone else: "This boy is a Martian." The young Cameron hadn't known exactly what a Martian was, but he'd gotten the drift.

Weird.

Suddenly he thought of something rather puzzling. No one had ever told him why he had no real parents!

"Who is my father?" he exclaimed, gazing up to heaven as if he expected some answer from on high.

But none came.

Maybe I wasn't born like everyone else, he thought bitterly. Perhaps I came out of a bottle or was pulled out of a magician's hat like some rabbit! But the sourness of this notion soon melted back into the basic sadness. *Who was my father?*

Somehow it was the paternity that mattered. Cam did not bother with thinking about his mother. Perhaps that was too far back to go.

Then, all at once, he had his inspiration. He knew how to penetrate Biocarbon-Amalgamate. It was so simple he laughed.

"Capture a pair of eyes!" he exclaimed, pleased with his own cleverness. "Borrow a brain!"

At that moment a bright green Honda Civic was approaching the gate. A young man in a tan car coat got out and walked to the control panel.

Cam concentrated instantly. In a flash he had scanned the young man's mind.

The scan was so expert the victim didn't miss a step. He punched his

code into the panel and returned to the Honda as the gate swung wide.

Through his captive's eyes, Cam saw it all.

The man's name was Arthur Frick. He was a lab assistant. He was a scanner controlled by Ephemerol. He was one of Revok's zombies.

Traveling in Frick's brain, Cam entered the compound. The photoelectric cells and laser sensors checked him through without a hitch. Cam's scan sat in the driving seat of Frick's unconscious mind, possessing without controlling. He let the young man go through the motions of his usual routine.

Frick parked his Honda in an underground garage. He took a long tunnel to a locker room deep inside the compound. In the locker room, he exchanged his tan car coat for a white protective suit that covered him from neck to ankles. He slipped on antiseptic outer shoes over his own brown loafers. Over his head he fixed a high domed white helmet with a wide glass panel masking his face.

Frick stepped through a glass door into an ionizing chamber. Violet lights flashed; he was purified. A far door let him into the heart of the laboratory.

Through Frick's eyes, Cam saw he was on a gallery overlooking what seemed to be a kind of underground factory in some space fantasy. Groups of men in white protective suits were tending automated retorts. Others wheeled gleaming chromium trolleys over a rubberized floor. There were television monitors everywhere, their unblinking eyes watching everything. The silent men in white resembled monks in an abbey updated from brewing Benedictine.

What they were brewing now was Ephemerol.

Frick took a trolley and wheeled it down a ramp. Through a thick glass screen wall Cam had a glimpse of a vast storage room. Racks and racks of phials stamped with the lab's logo were ranged in rows.

Why so much of the stuff? Cam wondered, letting Frick wheel his trolley to the main production floor. There was far too much Ephemerol in that store for the sole purpose of controlling a few score zombies.

It was time to raid Frick's captive brain. Cam scanned the young man's memory as if it were a computer.

He soon came up with an answer: RIPE PROGRAM.

Cam tried to dig deeper into Frick's mind, but he drew a blank. That was all the fellow knew. But Frick's brain gave him the next move: check the computer.

Cam turned his "zombie" around, redirected him back up the ramp. There was a terminal there, he remembered. He made Frick lead him

to it.

Firmly under control now, Frick tapped the console keys. The small screen flashed: RIPE PROGRAM. Cam was about to order his man to proceed further, when he almost lost the scan.

Cam's mind, back in the car hundreds of yards away beyond the wall, was momentarily blanked out. Then, just as abruptly, a lean demonic face flashed up on the screen of his inward eye.

Revok!

The direct image vanished, to be replaced by a vision of Revok through Frick's scanned eyes.

The "devil" was in a high glass control booth giving orders to an assistant. He was outside the antiseptic area and wore his usual dark three-piece suit. At that moment he appeared to be nothing more evil than the managing director of a supermodern chemical facility.

Cam wanted to get close to him. He yearned to get a better look at this extraordinary man. He made Frick hurry toward a metal gangway that led up toward the high glass booth.

But he missed Revok.

When Frick reached the top of the stairs, the man had vanished.

Cam was very disappointed. For a moment he kept Frick hovering there, peering in through the glass wall, searching. His captive's eyes behind the face panel seemed frantic. He attracted the attention of several other "monks."

Cam returned Frick to the computer terminal. Frick tapped the keys again. The screen repeated: "Access: RIPE PROGRAM."

Frick punched the "proceed" key and the screen began to run through the computer memory banks.

It came up with a list of names and addresses.

For a moment, Cam was baffled. What could these names signify?

Then he understood. They were all doctors! This was a list of ordinary general practitioners who were using Ephemerol on their patients.

But why?

Cam could not figure it out. There was no time, anyway. He committed to memory a random sample of the names and addresses on the list.

The screen completed its callup of MDs. What flashed there next almost knocked Cam off his scan.

RIPE PROGRAM: CONSEC CONTROL.

"ConSec?" Cam blurted. "Paul Ruth?"

This thought did lose Cam his scan. He couldn't relocate Frick's

brain.

But he didn’t try too hard. He had what he wanted.

Ripe Program: ConSec Control . . . Dr. Paul Ruth.

Cam turned the key in the ignition, put the car in gear and sped away from Biocarbon-Amalgamate.

• 9 •

Kim wrenched the hotel room door open as soon as she heard Cam's knock.

"What took you so long?" she cried out.

Cam took her in his arms. It was an instinctive act of protectiveness.

She was shaking. Uncontrollable tremors shuddered her limbs. She felt like a small frightened mouse he'd once rescued from a tomcat. Only this was a woman . . .

Cam had never held a woman in his arms before. This realization hit him with all the force of a revelation. It was nice! No, nice was too weak a word. It was great. It made him feel good. Tenderness flowed out of him like a strong scan. All I know is scanning, he thought, as he comforted her. It sounded very sad.

But there wasn't only tenderness in his feelings for this warm, soft body in his arms. There was something else; a kind of, well, excitement. It puzzled him. Why were the small hairs on his nape prickling so? Why were his palms sweating? It was almost as if he were afraid.

Afraid of what? Kim? But she was so helpless.

Kim pulled back. She seemed to pick up Cam's disturbance. Her look was guarded as she straightened her ruffled hair.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I don't know," Cam mumbled. "Holding you—"

Kim burst out laughing. Relief, derision, fondness bubbled in her throat.

"What's funny?" Cam scowled.

Kim sobered swiftly. "Haven't you ever held a woman before?" she teased.

"No."

"Did you like it?" she demanded, bold now.

"Yes. But—"

"But what?" she taunted. Her eyes, which had seemed so stricken only a moment before, were sparkling with fond mischief.

"It was—funny."

"Ah." Kim took Cam's face in both hands. Her palms were cool on his cheek. She gazed long and hard into his confused hazel eyes.

"You're an innocent, aren't you, Cameron?" she murmured.

"Huh?" he grunted.

"You really know nothing about anything."

"I know how to scan!" he said proudly. "Let me tell you—"

"Take off your coat," she interrupted. He obeyed. Kim sat on the edge of the bed. She patted the place beside her. "Come tell me what you did today."

Cam sat next to her, but not too close. The heat coming off her body was too intense. He couldn't think straight if she was too nearby.

He began to talk. Rapidly, he told her about his discoveries at Biocarbon-Amalgamate. He came close to boasting about his cleverness in "capturing" Frick's eyes. He could see she was impressed, and it spurred him on. In fact, it carried him away.

"I could have made the guy my slave forever!" he cried.

Kim nodded gravely. "Yes."

Something in the way she said this gave Cam pause. "It was good," he muttered confusedly.

Kim took his hand. She held it gently in her own cool palms.

"Cameron," she murmured, "now you begin to understand the temptations of power. Now you begin to understand Revok."

Cam was jolted. "You mean—"

"Power," Kim repeated. "It's a real kick. Stronger than drugs. Stronger than sex. Yes, it's all those highs rolled into one. And Revok is hooked on it. He's a power junkie."

"Oh my God," Cam breathed. He was really scared.

"Power and hatred—a devastating mix," Kim said. "That's why he must be stopped. But how?"

Cam hung his head. There was a silence. Kim seemed to forget she was holding his hand. She squeezed it as if it weren't a living thing.

"There's only one hope," Cam said, finally. "Paul Ruth."

Kim jerked her hands back. "But he's ConSec's man!"

"Yeah." Cam nodded. "But somehow, in spite of everything, I kind of trust him."

"How can you say that?" she demanded, her eyes flaring.

"I think he's using ConSec while they're using him. Look, he may not be as straight as I thought, but he cares about scanners."

Kim bit her lip. "This is dangerous."

"It's our only hope."

"Well, then, how do we handle it?"

"Let me think."

Cam stood. He paced over to the window. From the twentieth floor of the hotel the city was a glittering moonscape.

He saw his face reflected in the darkened glass. For a moment he was startled, not recognizing his own image. The man he saw there looked older than he imagined himself to be. The cheeks were taut, the eyes lined with grooves of worry. "Grown up," he said to himself, but aloud.

"What?" Kim frowned.

Cam turned to comfort her. "What's our edge?" he demanded.

"Huh?"

"What does Ruth want from us? What do we know that he doesn't?"

"I don't know." Kim shrugged.

Cam approached her. He stood over Kim, in charge again. She had to lean back a little to tilt her face up to hear him.

"Our edge is this: Ruth wants to penetrate Revok's organization. Also, he didn't seem to know about your group."

"So?"

"We could pass you off as a defector from Revok's outfit."

Kim recoiled. "What for?"

"I could tell him you want to inform. Spill the beans on Revok. That way we can get right into ConSec and find out what they're really up to. Find out if Ruth knows about the Ripe Program."

"And then?"

"I don't know. We'll have to take it from there. If Ruth's part of Revok's schemes, we'll find that out. If he isn't, we have a kind of wedge to drive between him and ConSec, that we can exploit."

"Sounds dangerous."

"Can you think of another angle? No? Then what've we got to lose? What choices do we have?"

"None."

"Right." Cam reached for the phone.

Kim panicked. "What are you doing?"

"Phoning Ruth."

"Right now?"

"Why wait?"

"Let's—" Kim began. "Have one quiet night together," she added, looking away.

"Okay," Cam said. "I'll phone him in the morning."

Cam woke early.

For a moment he didn't know quite where he was.

The room was silent, but for a steady murmur of strange breathing in his right ear.

He turned to see Kim's head on the pillow beside his own. Her breath was tickling his sideburns.

Then, with a sudden shock, he remembered they were naked together under the covers!

Contrary waves of feeling collided in his gut. Shame and delight, excitement and fright, hope and terror. Images flashed in his head that confused him utterly.

Last night—

He couldn't bear to think about it. Very carefully, he lifted the sheet aside and slipped out of bed.

When he had showered and dressed he felt better. Kim was sitting up in bed when he came out of the bathroom.

She smiled. "Cameron."

The way she said his name, as if it were a ripe plum in her warm mouth, tore him apart.

"I don't even know your whole name!" he said foolishly.

She laughed. "Kim Obrist."

"Kim Obrist," he repeated stupidly.

"How do you do, Cameron Vale?" she said, mock-solemn.

"I must phone Ruth," he blurted, and grabbed for the phone.

Kim fled to the bathroom. Cam had one dazzling, mind-searing vision of her naked body as she ran. It blasted a hole in his brain. His hand was trembling as he dialed.

Ruth's gruff voice on the other end was almost a relief. "Yes?"

"It's Cameron!" Cam exclaimed. "Vale," he added lamely.

"Cameron!" Ruth's voice sharpened instantly. "Where have you been? Are you all right?"

"Listen, Paul. I've gotten to Revok."

"How?"

"I have someone from his organization. I want to bring her in. She wants to talk."

"Fantastic! A real informant?"

"Real," Cam confirmed.

"Excellent. I'll get back to you. Arrange the pickup."

"When?"

"Soon. This morning. My God, Cameron, this is incredible! And I'm so glad you're safe, my boy."

The doctor's concern sounded very genuine in Cam's ear. So did his excitement. "Bye, Paul," Cam said softly, and put down the receiver.

Kim came out of the bathroom. She was wrapped in a large towel. "Yes?' she queried.

"They'll pick us up soon."

"Oh." She came up to Cam and kissed him lightly on the ear. She smelled of shampoo and warm soap. "Go out for ten minutes. Let me dress."

Cam obeyed.

Keller was in a phone booth a few blocks away from ConSec Central.

"Emergency," he said to Revok.

"What?" Revok grunted.

"Vale's coming in. Says he has an informant from your people. He's bringing her to ConSec."

"An informant? He's lying!"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. All my people check out."

"Then what's Vale up to?"

"God knows."

"Vale knows something. Or his informant does. It could be about us."

"Mm." A long pause. "Keller?"

"Yes?"

"Make sure you're the one who interrogates that informant, whoever the woman is."

"Affirmative. But Ruth will talk to Vale. I can't stop that."

"Then stop Ruth."

Keller blinked in surprise. "Liquidate Ruth? But I thought—"

"I want you to—how do you say it in your jargon—'Terminate with extreme prejudice.' Understood?"

"But I thought—"

"Kill Ruth. That's an order."

And the line went dead.

The helicopter was a noisy silver bug in the pastel blue sky. Kim and Cam, seated behind the pilot, gripped the edges of their bucket seats as the mechanical insect lurched down toward the concrete silo of ConSec Central.

They came to rest in a circle of armed security men. A long black limousine was parked on the edge of this ring of guards.

One of the security men ran forward to help Kim and Cam down from the helicopter, ducking under the still buzzing blades. He led them to the limousine.

“Where’s Doctor Ruth?” Cam demanded.

For answer, the man thrust a walkie-talkie into Cam’s fist. Ruth’s voice crackled in the plastic box.

“Cameron? Good morning. I’m going to have to ask you and your companion to allow yourselves to be injected with Ephemerol. ConSec insists upon it, for security reasons. I’m sure you can understand.”

Cameron shrugged. He handed back the walkie-talkie without a word, and helped Kim into the long black motor.

“Proceed,” he told the security man curtly.

From a high window in the ConSec building Ruth and Keller gazed down on the scene far below. When Cam and Kim got docilely into the limousine, Keller nodded in satisfaction.

“He bought it,” he said crisply.

Ruth turned to him. “Well, Keller? My man came back with the goods.”

But the security chief was not in the mood to concede any points.

“Let’s see what he’s got,” he said grimly. But then he added, with a rough stab at humor: “Let’s save the party till we’ve unwrapped the presents, okay, Doc?”

Ruth’s face was abruptly grave. “It won’t take long. I have a way with these creatures.”

“Creatures is the word,” Keller snorted. “You can have Vale. I want the girl.”

“Oh no!” Ruth protested.

“Trevellyan’s orders,” Keller snapped back. “From the top.”

The doctor was shaken. His glasses glimmered miserably. “But Keller, it just won’t work. Police state tactics—”

Keller turned his back and strode off. He paused at a door marked NO ADMITTANCE and inserted a plastic security card into a slotted panel alongside. The heavy door opened.

“Send the board a letter,” he flung over his shoulder. “I’m sure they’d love to hear from you!”

Keller stepped through the door and slammed it shut behind him. Ruth stared at the solid barrier for a very long time.

Cam was ushered by two uniformed security guards into a bare small room.

Ruth rose to greet him. “Cameron!” he exclaimed, holding out his hands.

“Where’s Kim?” Cameron asked, ignoring the offered embrace.

“Congratulations on your success! I’m so glad to have you back home.”

“They said she’d be here,” Cam insisted, staring around at the blank walls of the interrogation chamber.

Ruth sighed. He sat down heavily. “She’s being—seen in another place,” he murmured.

Cam gazed at the doctor. “You promised.”

Ruth threw up his hands. “I’m only an employee here,” he said sadly. Then he leaned forward urgently. “The needles they gave you were harmless. She’ll be able to protect herself if—”

“If what?” Cam demanded.

“If necessary,” Ruth said, withdrawing. “Sit down, Cameron. Let’s talk.”

“You don’t trust your own outfit?” Cam scowled.

“I don’t trust anyone, not even myself,” the doctor said quietly. “Please sit down.”

When Cam was seated, Ruth added: “It was meant as a gesture of good faith, not doping you both. I don’t need drugs. I have my own way of talking to people. I’ve nothing to hide.”

Cam shoved out his jaw. “Not even the Ripe Program?”

Ruth’s frown seemed genuine. “The what?”

Cam pressed the attack. “Do you know of a drug lab operation named Biocarbon-Amalgamate?”

“Surely. I founded it in 1942.”

“You?”

“Yes. Sold out to ConSec years ago. That’s how I came to be here. It was part of the deal.” He smiled wanly. “ConSec and I have a, well—genial working relationship.”

“Do you know what the lab does now?”

“Well, I haven’t had anything to do with it for a while now, but I believe it produces some form of chemical weaponry, among other things.”

“It makes Ephemerol for Revok.”

Cam watched the doctor closely. He saw the spasm of shock in the man’s melancholy brown eyes.

“What?”

“More than that, Revok runs it.”

“Impossible!”

“Truth. I penetrated it. Revok is mass producing Ephemerol for something called the Ripe Program.”

“What on earth for?”

“Something to do with general practitioners. Ordinary doctors in practice all over North America.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I thought you’d know.”

“You thought?” Ruth stared at Cam. “That I was in cahoots with Darryl Revok?”

“Are you?”

Ruth’s pale white hands fluttered helplessly. “Cameron,” he said softly. “If you only knew.”

“What, Paul? What?”

Ruth smiled then. It was disconcerting. Cam couldn’t figure out what that sad little grimace signified.

“Never mind that now,” Ruth said firmly. “We must know what Revok’s up to. We must find out!”

“How?”

Then Cam had a flash of perception. Things came together in his head suddenly.

“The answer’s in your own computer. It’s a ConSec program. Do you have access?”

“No. I don’t have computer clearance. They don’t trust me that far.”

“Damn.”

“But you do!” Ruth exclaimed. “A scanner!”

“Huh?”

“Computers have a form of nervous system. You could scan it almost as you would a human mind!”

“You think—” Cam said doubtfully.

But Ruth was on his feet. “Come with me!”

Cam stopped him at the door. “You know what this means, Paul?”

“Means?” The doctor frowned.

“There’s a traitor in ConSec. Revok has a man inside.”

Ruth’s eyes dilated behind his lenses. “Oh my God.” He grabbed Cam’s arm. “Let’s hurry!”

Ruth opened the door and pulled Cam out past a pair of confused security guards. As he was hustled down the corridor a frightening thought entered Cam’s head: *Kim!*

But he couldn’t stop to find out how she was doing right then. Yet all the same her name reverberated movingly in his mind.

Kim Obrist . . .

• 10 •

"Kim Obrist," Kim said, replying to Keller's first question.

They were in an interrogation chamber down the corridor from the one in which Cam and Dr. Ruth were talking. Keller was circling the seated Kim like a hawk coming in for the kill.

"What a pleasant surprise," he murmured silkily. "You're very attractive."

"What's your name?" Kim demanded.

"Not relevant," Keller snapped. He came to a ramrod halt before Kim. "Okay, let's do it the formal way. Tell me about Darryl Revok's organization."

Kim hunched down lower on the hard metal chair. She didn't like this man. His cropped iron-gray hair was like a steel helmet. His silver eyes were bullet tips. His voice was gun shot.

"Before I tell you anything," she said steadily, "I want to know how you intend to protect me. When Revok realizes I've come to you he'll try to kill me."

Keller shrugged impatiently. "Your best protection, young lady, is to tell us what we need to know. As soon as you do, Revok will cease to be a threat to anyone."

Kim shook her head. "Not good enough. Revok's people are everywhere. I'm scared." And she shuddered graphically to emphasize her very real fear.

Keller put out his thick-fingered hand. He took hold of Kim's delicate chin, lifting her face to confront his own.

"To be frank with you, Kim," he said, very slowly and carefully, "the only one you should be afraid of is me."

Kim blinked. She shook her face free of the hard man's hand.

"Afraid of you? Why? I've come here of my own free will!"

Keller gave a mirthless smile. He swung on his heel and strode over to a metal panel set in the far wall. He took a key from his pocket, unlocked the panel and turned off the row of switches that controlled the video monitors.

"Now we can be private," he said, returning to Kim.

He bent over the seated young woman, bringing his face so close she could smell his shaving lotion.

"Kim, you're a goddam liar," he said simply.

Kim recoiled, trying to make space between them. “Pardon?”

“I know and you know you are not what you say you are.”

“And what’s that?” Kim gulped.

“One of Revok’s zombies.”

Kim began to rise from her seat. “I don’t have to listen to this! I want to talk to someone else. I want Cameron.”

Keller’s hard palm hit her cheek, hard enough to rattle her teeth. She fell back onto the chair, stunned.

Keller took out the automatic he had stowed in a shoulder holster.

“Kim, listen to me,” he said with quiet grimness. “I have contacts in Revok’s outfit. They know you. You’re a renegade. You wouldn’t go along with Revok’s operation.”

“I—” Kim blurted.

Keller cut her off with a gesture of the hard black gun.

“You’re a traitor, Kim. You know what happens to traitors.”

Kim was paralyzed momentarily. She saw the automatic’s snout begin to seek her out. In this airtight chamber the sound of the shot would die. *Like me,* she thought. *Like me!*

Keller smiled. It wasn’t pleasant. “Bye, Kim,” he murmured, putting the gun to her eye.

The instantaneous scan that leaped from her black pupils surprised Kim as much as it did Keller. She hadn’t conjured up her force consciously. Some reflex of survival had summoned it, and it was powerful.

Keller was slammed all the way across the room to the far wall. He hit it with a thump.

The look of surprise on his brutal face was almost comic. It was as if he was accusing her of betrayal, of being unfair. Blood trickled from his left nostril as he slumped to the floor.

Kim jumped for the door. She wrenched it open and fled down the corridor.

Keller was a fit man; his mind and body were sharply honed in a rigid discipline of ambition. He recovered fast from Kim’s counterblow. In a moment he was on his feet and hitting the big red alarm button in the control console.

Bells rang. Armed guards rushed into the room.

“Those scanners,” Keller snapped at them. “Search and destroy. Put it on the air. *Kill them!”*

Cam and Dr. Ruth heard the alarm bells as they were turning a corner in the long corridor.

Cam knew at once of Kim's danger. "Kim!" he cried out passionately. "Where—"

Ruth tugged his sleeve. "This is more important, Cameron!"

Cam turned on the doctor, wild-eyed. "You bastard," he said softly.

Paul Ruth recoiled. The anger in Cam's eyes was terrible. For a second he feared a killing scan. In fact, just then he almost welcomed it. It would be more bearable than the accusation in the young man's stare.

"Cameron," he mumbled.

But Cam whirled around and ran off back down the corridor, sensing out Kim's location in the building's maze.

The doctor watched him go. All at once something snapped in him. He said out loud: "It's over. *Over!"*

He found an open door nearby and drifted dazedly into yet another interrogation chamber. He slumped into a chair and put his head in his hands.

Over, his mind repeated. The long nightmare . . . the incubus, sucking out my joy, bleeding me dry from inside. As if in confirmation, he felt a tearing in his bowels, like claws raking, as if some small demon were trapped there. "Ripe indeed!" he exclaimed out loud. "Overripe, more like!"

Cam's terrible, accusatory gaze flashed before his mind's eye.

"Cameron," Ruth murmured. "Yes, I will confess." Unconsciously his stream of thought slipped from the audible to the inward. I forced her. I used her as a guinea pig, a human lab rat, a womb to generate my scientific fantasies of creating a super race.

"My own sons!" he croaked. "My wife—"

Paul Ruth, wallowing in his anguish, did not see Keller step quickly into the room behind him.

"My own two boys," Ruth wept, tears dampening his beard. "Now it's Ripe." His head jerked back. "Ripe must be stopped!"

It was at that precise moment Keller put his automatic to the base of Paul Ruth's skull and shot him dead.

Cam and Kim ran toward one another down the long corridor.

"Kim!" he cried. "What happened?"

"He tried to kill me!" Kim gasped, falling into his arms.

"Bastards!" Cam swore.

"And your doctor?" Kim asked, beginning to recover her breath.

"Bastards," Cam said again, searching for a way of escape. "Come."

They walked quickly down the corridor. Turning a corner, they saw

a barricade being set up by three armed security guards.

One of the guards was holding a rifle with a telescopic sight. As soon as he saw the scanners, he put the gun to his shoulder and aimed at them down the length of the corridor.

They were sitting ducks.

"Cam?" Kim muttered.

"Scan," Cam said. "Together!"

Kim and Cam linked scans. The force they generated took a quantum leap of power being fused.

Something very weird happened inside the rifleman's head. The trapped image of Kim in his sights, her face, became that of an old lady's: his mother's!

Yes, he was about to shoot and kill his own gray-haired sorrowing mom! The rifle wavered.

"Fire, man!" his fellow guard cried. *"Fire!"*

"I can't," the poor man gasped. "It's my mom!"

"Your what?"

The third guard understood suddenly. "They're fucking his head," he exclaimed. "Scanners!" He grabbed the rifle. "I don't mind shooting dear old mom." He laughed, aiming down the corridor.

The first guard fell to his knees on the floor. "Mommy, Mommy, I miss you so much," he howled piteously.

His colleague laughed out loud. Kim was clear in his sights, fixed by the crosshairs. He began to squeeze the trigger.

But all at once Kim's face became the round blue planet Earth as seen from the moon.

Cam and Kim walked rapidly toward the barricade, scanning intensely. The guard with the rifle panicked. He fired.

The Earth exploded in the rifle sight. It shredded like a giant balloon, spilling a mess of blood and guts that sped toward the eye pressed to the telescopic lens.

The guard dropped the gun in panic. In his vision, bloody entrails were dripping from the walls; lava churned; smoke billowed. He dropped to his knees.

"Oh my God," he moaned. "I've just destroyed the world!"

Kim and Cam pressed around the barricade in a confusion of shouts and pounding boots. As they slipped out of the exit they heard the stricken rifleman wail: "The most beautiful planet in the universe, blown! Blood on my hands . . ."

The scanners came out into the open air. They blinked like moles in the light.

“Where to now?” Kim asked helplessly.

“We need a car. There’s one over there, with a driver all waiting.”

Cam started toward the black limousine. Then he stopped dead.

“What is it?” Kim said, seeing the strange expression on Cam’s face.

Cam was rooted. His eyes were painful.

“Cam?” Kim wavered. “Are you—”

“Paul Ruth,” Cam said flatly. “He is dead.”

“How—” Kim began. She stopped. Of course, the scan.

Cam shook himself free of the trance. “Come,” he murmured. “The car.”

The scanners ran toward the limousine, sending out a force wave to take over the driver’s brain.

• 11 •

The driver, a puppet mastered by Cam's scan, sped the limo from ConSec Central through the suburban wastelands.

Kim and Cam huddled together in the wide back seat that was like a cave of deep-buttoned black leather. The smoked glass of the car's windows turned the passing streets into semi-night.

"What now?" Kim asked, looking to Cam for direction yet again.

Cam smiled down at her. At a certain point the young woman had put herself in his hands. Her trust was now total.

"You're as innocent as I am," Cam said.

Kim blinked. "Pardon?"

"You and me, we're two of a kind. Babes in the wood who find themselves taking on the devil."

"Who is the devil?" She frowned.

"Revok. ConSec. Keller. Paul Ruth."

Kim searched his face. "You had a connection with that man Ruth?"

Cam scowled. "He was—" He couldn't find the word.

Kim shook her head sadly. "So many mixed-up people," she murmured vaguely. "What will we do now?"

"Kill Ripe."

"How do we do that?"

"Take over the ConSec computer."

"How do we do that?"

"Let me think."

Cam closed his eyes to concentrate his thoughts. Kim relaxed and watched the streets go by. Her own mind was blank. She was too exhausted to think. She wished this strange black limousine would roll on forever, carrying Cam and her to the far ends of the earth.

"Pull over!" Cam rapped out suddenly. "Into that gas station."

The driver obeyed. There was a blissfully servile smile on his bland young face. The car drew up beside the pumps. "Fill her up," the driver ordered the gas station attendant, who was visibly impressed by the magnificence of the machine.

"There's a phone booth there," Cam was explaining to Kim. "I'm going to access the computer. I scanned the code from Ruth. He pretended he didn't know it, but I didn't believe him."

"And then?"

"I'll blow it all."

"You'll what?"

"I'll scan the computer. Blow its circuits. Explode its data banks. Ripe will go bust."

Kim gripped his arm. "Cameron, have you the force? I mean, to go up against a computer?"

"You don't think I have what it takes?" he challenged.

"Oh, Cam, you're potent, but this is a machine."

"An electronic brain, built by humans. I'm human, too."

Cam opened the car door. Kim began to follow him.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm in it with you. The two of us—"

"No!"

Cam's exclamation was so vehement the gas station attendant looked around. He was curious to see who had the privilege of this amazing limo. To his surprise, it was a pair of sloppy kids. He shrugged disgustedly.

"Yes."

Kim's retort was quiet but adamant. Cam saw at once there was no use arguing. He too shrugged.

But he made one condition: she wasn't allowed in the phone booth. "It could explode," he said. "The energy will be tremendous. You stand by the open door, okay?"

Kim agreed reluctantly. She watched as Cam poked the buttons with the computer's access number. When he got the answering tone, he said into the receiver: "Access Ripe Program. Code key ZB-1097R-3PO."

An image of Paul Ruth's face materialized before Cam as he waited for the clearance signal. He irritably scrubbed it from his mind.

The signal came: three long beeps; a short; two longs; two shorts.

Cam closed his eyes. He concentrated his mind as he'd never done before. A scan tone began to rise and revolve, bouncing off the glass walls of the booth. Kim's eyes were also shut. Their linked power flashed down the telephone lines into the computer center at ConSec.

In the ConSec computer center Keller was pacing anxiously.

Around him was all the paraphernalia of modern electronics: data banks with tape spools whirling, flashing terminals, digital counters flashing their information ceaselessly. Three white-coated programmers tended these busy, clever robots like keepers in an

electronic zoo.

"What's the problem?" Keller demanded of the head programmer. "It can't be all that difficult to change a program's access code?"

The programmer shrugged. "Look for yourself," he said, inviting Keller over to his terminal.

Across the dark screen there flashed a message in green lettering: RIPE PROGRAM INACCESSIBLE.

Keller frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means that someone has reprogrammed the computer and we can't get in. Somebody not only threw away the key, he plugged the keyhole."

"Try it again."

"Okay."

The technician typed on his keyboard: REQUEST: PROGRAM ACCESS.

The screen responded with: NAME OF PROGRAM?

The programmer typed: RIPE PROGRAM.

The computer answered: RIPE PROGRAM INACCESSIBLE.

"That's as deep into it as we're going to get," the programmer said.

"How could this happen?" Keller demanded angrily. "This room is max security!"

"We're plugged into the telephone system. Anyone who knows the right series of access codes could get in here long distance."

Keller blinked. "You mean someone's getting that right now?"

They were interrupted by one of the other programmers. "Hey, Lee," he called out from his console. "Punch up your internal monitor. Access code is IM 863."

"Why? What is it?" his chief asked.

"Somebody's inside this thing right now, getting the Ripe Program!"

The head programmer punched up REQUEST: INTERNAL MONITOR. The computer replied with IM CODE PLEASE? The programmer typed: IM 863, and the screen responded by displaying a list of names and addresses.

The names were arranged in three columns. The first column consisted of the names of doctors; the second listed the names of female patients, one per doctor; the third column gave the address of small towns in North America, one per doctor.

Keller stared at the screen. His jaw was rigid. "You mean someone's getting that right now?"

"Yeah," the chief technician said. "But I don't understand how. He's somehow gotten right inside the no-access barrier!"

Keller slammed his fist on the screen top. "It's him! Vale! He got the code and now he's right there inside!"

He swung away, pacing. “I want to hurt him. How can we hurt him real bad before he gets out?”

“Hurt him?” The programmer gaped. “I don’t understand.”

Keller turned on him. “Right now Vale’s nervous system and the computer’s ‘nervous system’ are coupled. I want to cripple them both. I want to kill them both!”

“That’s—” the technician began. “Well, I could override the max security circuits—I mean the Max Security Self-Destruct—and blow all the circuits.”

“Do it,” Keller snapped. “Now.”

The head programmer shook his head. “No way. No sir, not without the written authorization of ConSec Leader.”

Keller did not hesitate. He drew his automatic and jammed it against the man’s cropped skull. The other two programmers began to rise from their padded chairs.

“Sit down,” Keller commanded them. “This is your authorization,” he told the chief. “Do it now or I’ll blow your head off.”

“Y-Y-Yessir,” the programmer stammered. “I’m doing it now.”

And he began to punch rapidly at the keyboard.

The phone pressed to Cam’s ear was pouring out a flood of information.

It was more than a flood, it was a deluge. The entire Ripe Program, names and addresses of doctors, patients, towns rushed like a tidal wave into his brain, against the background static of electric microchips humming, circuits buzzing and the firing of the neurons in his own overloaded synapses. The charge of energy surged through his body and down his arm into the hand that was locked in Kim’s.

She was trembling. Both felt as if they were on a high-speed locomotive coursing through an immense switchyard with a maniac at the controls. They were traveling at the speed of light, thousands of miles per minute, toward some terrible collision.

Around them the scan tone zipped and whined its high-pitched screech. The receiver at Cam’s ear began to grow hot. It began to hurt. He sweated, but he kept his ear glued there, separating the information printout from the static in the computer’s nerves and his own.

Cam, Kim and the computer were Siamese triplets welded together by a potent electronic bond.

The head programmer looked up at Keller.

“This is the last step,” he said. “Are you sure?”

Keller nudged the man's temple with the cold nose of his automatic. Around the room, red lights were flashing at various terminals and consoles.

"Do it," Keller said crisply.

The programmer allowed himself a tight smile. He typed up: REQUEST: MAX SECURITY SELF-DESTRUCT NOW.

PASSWORD? the screen responded at once.

LOGON: 1-2-4-CS-130, the technician typed.

START BATCH STREAM, the computer printed.

An unseen motor whirred somewhere. The programmer began to rise.

"Don't move!" Keller snapped.

"I have to complete the procedure on the master console," the programmer said primly.

"Move," Keller ordered.

He followed the technician to a large screen on the far wall. The man set his fingers on the keyboard.

"Are you absolutely—" the programmer began.

"Do it!" Keller barked.

The man's supple fingers played over the keys. CLOSE ALL EXTERNAL CHANNELS: ACTIVATE SECURITY FILES.

Tape spools whirled rapidly. The red lights were now blinking continuously.

SECURITY SELF-DESTRUCT: 10-9, the screen began.

"Let's get out," Keller said, backing off nervously.

The programmer smiled openly. "No need. It's all very quiet. Just internal circuiting."

"Yeah?" Keller said doubtfully. "Nobody's ever switched off a scanner before!"

8-7-6-5, the screen counted out inexorably.

"Just internal circuiting," the head programmer repeated, folding his arms completely as Keller cowered in a corner.

In the suburban garage phone booth, Kim and Cam were dying.

The burning receiver fused to his ear, Cam fought for breath. His eyes rolled back into his head. His pulse had almost vanished. The fist that gripped Kim's was locked in near-rigor mortis.

Kim was sinking. Cam was dimly aware of her dead weight dragging at his arm. The energy pounding out of the black plastic instrument melting against his skull was killing them both.

In the background, the garage man was serenely filling the capacious tank of the black-windowed limousine. The driver was

smiling at nothing, a zombie without a care in the world. It was dusk and the starlings chattered on the telephone wires, untouched by the electricity racing beneath their claws.

And then, when it seemed too late to save their lives, the tidal wave reversed.

The Cam-Kim scan tripped the circuits in the computer at ConSec Central and sent the energies surging backward. Cam's eyes slid back down into focus. He concentrated as he never had in his life before. There was murder in his heart for that remote electronic robot. It was exhilarating.

The distant computer represented everything that had humiliated him in all his years as an oddity, a freak. It was all the forces of "normality" rolled into one, all the sneering judgments at his "queerness," all the tight-assed meanness of the world that had put him down for years and years. He hated the computer with a joy he'd never known.

He sent his scan whirling like a dagger into the electrical heart of the computer, and murdered it.

3-2-1-0: SELF-DESTRUCT.

The computer screen recorded its own death silently. All the human eyes were upon those green letters and figures in the ConSec Center.

"See?" the head programmer said. "I told you. No fireworks."

Keller straightened up and smiled. He tucked his automatic away under his armpit.

"That's it," he said cheerfully. "Vale is dead."

"And so is our program," the technician reminded him.

Keller shrugged. "There are always other programs."

He was moving toward the door when the room exploded.

Flames leaped from the terminals in a roar. Fireballs burst from the spinning tape spools. The consoles disintegrated, spewing their electronic guts.

A huge chunk of equipment smashed into the head programmer's chest and carried him back through a plate glass window into the next room. The other two programmers vanished beneath a hail of blazing circuitry. Keller was crushed to death by a falling data bank.

The ConSec computer center was reduced, in a few violent seconds, to a pile of smoking junk.

• • •

In the phone booth, the spell was broken.

Cam dropped the receiver as the phone panel caught fire. The

instrument was melting. He dragged Kim away to the safety of a pile of lumber stacked across the roadway.

The booth exploded behind them. They huddled behind the planks, watching dazedly as it went up in a geyser of flame.

The gas attendant looked around in shock. The hose jerked loose from the limo's filling cap and dribbled gasoline on the ground.

The attendant started to run for his life, just as the pumps behind him caught fire. He was smashed flat to the ground by the force of the blast.

The flames swallowed the black limousine and its smiling chauffeur. They vanished in a ball of orange fire.

From the safety of their hideaway, Cam and Kim stared at the amazing firework display they had set off, like a pair of children who've started more than they could hope to finish.

• 12 •

Sycamore Street was the best avenue in the country town of Woodsville. In the late fall the gold and russet leaves of the trees that gave it its name covered the roadway and sidewalks with a rich carpet.

The doctor's house was a three-story white clapboard Victorian Gothic fantasy with pointed arches, leaded windows and gingerbread fretwork on the gables. A mock-antique gaslamp with yellow glass bore the doctor's shingle: "Dr. L. Frane. M.D."

Cam and Kim sat in their rented car across the street and watched several patients go in and out of the doctor's office. The morning sun was sharp in the chill air. They squinted with the glare.

"Are you sure Frane was on the list?" Kim asked, for the third time.

"Absolutely," Cam said tensely. "Dr. L. Frane, 12 Sycamore Street, Woodsville, Ontario. Patient: Mrs. Molly Green," he recited.

"Why did you pick him out of all those names?" Kim asked curiously.

Cam shrugged. "I liked the address. It sounded homey."

Kim squeezed his arm fondly. "You'd like to have a home, wouldn't you, Cam? Maybe when this is all over . . ."

"You and me?" Cam said eagerly.

"Why not?" She smiled. "I'm an orphan too, you know."

"First we have to stop Revok," Cam reminded her grimly.

"Ah, Revok," Kim muttered, shrinking a little. "Can we?"

"We've come this far, and destroyed his program. We can't pull out now."

She shuddered. "He must be furious."

"I must find out what he's up to with these small-town doctors. Why is he giving them Ephemerol? Why are they collaborating? This is the last piece of the puzzle."

"Well, let's get it over with," Kim said, opening the car door.

They crossed the street and walked up the side path to the office door. Inside they found a small waiting room with only one occupant, a rather nervous and very pregnant young woman.

"Is the receptionist around?" Kim asked her.

"Uh, yes," the young woman answered. "Somewhere."

There was only one other door to the room. It was half open, leading into a corridor. Cam pointed to it. “I’ll go find the doctor,” he said, and vanished.

Kim sat down, somewhat at a loss. Across the way, the young woman sat with her bloated, awkward belly thrust forward like a balloon. She looked very uncomfortable. Her anxious fingers twisted a large white envelope on her lap.

Kim, very nervous herself, felt a strange vibration from the downcast young mother in the white sweater. Her eyes were drawn to the envelope stretched between tense fingers over her protruding stomach. The envelope had a name typed on it. When she managed to read it, Kim had a shock.

The name was Mrs. Molly Green.

Dr. Frane was examining a half-naked old woman when Cam opened the door to his inner office.

His stethoscope was pressed to the sagging breasts of the patient perched on the high couch. The doctor seemed like any middle-aged, mildly distracted small-town general practitioner.

Cam was surprised. He didn’t know quite what he had expected to find in Frane’s office; Dr. Frankenstein’s fiendish laboratory, perhaps? But this man was clearly harmless.

“Dr. Frane?” Cam asked, still a shade doubtful.

The doctor turned to him. “Who are you? Can’t you see I’m busy? Wait outside. Where’s that damn receptionist?”

Cam reached into his coat pocket. He drew out the small phial of Ephemerol with the Biocarbon-Amalgamate logo stamped on it that he had taken from Revok’s zombie in the record store.

“Are you prescribing this drug, Doctor?” he asked.

Frane’s eyes narrowed instantly. He slipped the stethoscope down around his neck. “I’ll be back in a moment,” he told his patient.

The doctor approached Cam and led him out of the office, shutting the door behind him carefully.

In the corridor, he stared at Cam. “Who are you? What do you want?” he demanded.

“I want to know who you’re giving Ephemerol to, and why,” Cam said.

“Who are you?” the doctor said angrily.

Seeing the man’s antagonism, Cam switched to a scan. He locked his eyes on the doctor’s and read his mind.

The information was sparse. For the doctor, Ephemerol was a

tranquilizer specifically designed to be safe during pregnancy. It was manufactured by a very reputable drug company, Biocarbon-Amalgamate. So far as he knew, the drug was tested and officially approved.

“What the hell do you want?” Frane repeated, as Cam ended the scan.

“Nothing. Thanks, Doctor,” Cam said, and walked away.

In the waiting room, Kim’s nose was starting to bleed.

A low scan tone was vibrating around the room. It wasn’t coming from the mother. Her eyes were down on the floor.

Where was it coming from?

Kim got up. Her knees were jelly. Blood trickled from her left nostril. She staggered toward the door. The young mother-to-be glanced up without curiosity. She seemed utterly weighed down by the burden in her belly.

“Oh my God!” Kim gasped, as the realization hit her.

The baby!

She blundered into Cam in a sunporch leading off the corridor and fell into his arms with a gasp.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” Cam cried.

“I was scanned,” Kim mumbled. “Back there.”

Cam frowned. “The young woman?”

“Her baby!” Kim blurted. “The unborn child!”

“Yes,” Cam said. “I know.”

Kim drew back in shock. “You know?”

“I know what Revok’s up to. I know why he’s distributing Ephemerol among all these small-town doctors.”

“Why? What for?” Kim asked, eyes wide with apprehension.

“To generate a race of scanners,” Cam said.

“Oh God,” Kim gasped, and fell into his arms.

But her collapse wasn’t due to despair. It was the result of the tiny dart that punched a hole in the glass of the sunporch and stabbed her in the back.

Kim fell to the floor, dragging Cam with her. She was groaning. Cam saw the dart at once. He jerked at the red feathers and plucked it free as Kim writhed in his lap.

“Are you okay?” he asked anxiously.

Kim’s eyes rolled in her head. She couldn’t answer. She was swooning.

Cam pulled her to her feet. He pushed open the door and dragged Kim into the air.

Her body was getting heavier and heavier in his arms. “To the car,” he panted, half-carrying, half-pulling her across the doctor’s lawn.

But she was too much of a dead weight, unconscious as she was. Cam rested with her under a sycamore tree, gasping.

“Kim,” he moaned. “Dear Kim . . .”

He was too concerned to see the black figure that stepped out from behind the tree trunk, dart gun in one fist.

Cam didn’t see the lewd grin on Revok’s face as he fired a tranquilizing dart into the young man’s back.

• 13 •

Cam awoke in a strange room.

The first thing he saw was a huge painting, a canvas with great swatches of purple and blood red, like a raw wound.

It was fixed to a brick wall over a fireplace. A log fire burned there, sending sparks up the chimney.

"Aha. Sleeping beauty awakes," a strange voice said.

Cam's eyes swiveled round. He saw a man perhaps a little older than himself perched on the edge of a large desk pouring himself a drink of scotch. The man's lean figure was clothed in the vest and pants of a dark pinstripe suit. His tie was loosened.

"Revok," said Cam, sitting up.

Revok saluted with his glass. "To the life," he agreed, smiling.

The devil looked a lot less demonic close up, Cam thought. Only the small crater in his high forehead reminded Cam of the man's dementia. He had a flash of that film clip Paul Ruth had shown him, of the young Revok in the interrogation booth with the "third eye" painted over the Elastoplast.

He shuddered and realized he was in his shirtsleeves. "Where's Kim?" he asked.

"Next door," Revok reassured him. "She'll wake up in a few hours. We don't want anyone else here, Cameron. This is just between you and me."

Cam noticed the use of his first name, but let it go. He gazed around the room curiously. What was the devil's lair like?

It was, in fact, surprisingly commonplace. It was a large, spacious office-living room furnished with comfortable yellow velvet couches, low marble coffee tables and potted plants. The lighting was indirect and subdued. Behind the modern mahogany desk was a steel-and-leather Eames chair that tilted.

On the wall behind the desk was the Biocarbon-Amalgamate logo.

"I thought your partner Keller would be here with you," Cam said tartly.

Revok shook his head. He was still smiling a little, as if amused by some tremendous private joke he couldn't share. Yet his voice and his black eyes were kind.

"It seems the man died when you blew up his computer. By the

way, that was very impressive."

"Keller murdered Paul Ruth. He deserved to die," Cam said severely.

Revok's eyes tightened. "Don't mourn Ruth's death. Celebrate it with me."

"He tried to help me," Cam said weakly.

"Bullshit," Revok retorted. "There's only one person on earth who has really tried to help you, Cameron." Revok jabbed a thumb at his own chest. "Me."

Cam rose shakily. He still felt a little groggy from the tranquilizer Revok had darted into his back. The tiny puncture stung a bit as he worked his stiff shoulders.

Revok came toward him, and Cam tensed.

"You? You sent your zombies out to kill me!"

Revok was close now. He gazed earnestly into Cam's hazel eyes, as if searching for something; a kind of recognition, perhaps?

"Never. Never you, Cameron. I've been trying to find you for years. And when Keller told me you'd been dredged up by Ruth, and sent out on a ridiculous mission as some kind of amateur spy, I tried to protect you. I tried to guide you to me."

"That's a laugh," Cam said uncertainly.

Revok shook his head. He looked sad. "I could've killed you many times. You know that."

Cam knew it, but he wasn't about to admit it to this strange man with the intelligent, intense, wounded face.

"Why would you do that—protect me?"

Revok took a step closer. His face was only a yard away. His eyes were soft yet serious.

"Because you're my brother, Cam. My kid brother."

Cam gaped. He almost burst out laughing. "No! Impossible!"

Revok didn't take his eyes off Cam's face for a second. "Who's your mother, Cameron?" he asked quietly.

"I—I don't know."

"Who's your father?"

"I don't know!"

"Do you remember your childhood at all?"

"No. Well, I remember . . . foster parents, orphanages—"

"You were farmed out, Cam. Kept on ice. Like me."

"Why?"

"It was a deliberate policy. An experiment. We were human guinea pigs, brother."

"That's ridiculous!"

"You, Cameron, were monitored every day of your life. You were kept as human garbage. He knew where you were, but he never reached out to haul you up out of the slime till he needed you. Till ConSec needed you, because they had trouble putting me away."

"Who is 'he'?" Cam asked, trembling.

"Our daddy. Dr. Paul Ruth."

Cam's knees began to fold. Revok took his arm and led him to the leather armchair by the desk. He seated Cam there and perched on the edge of the desk.

"Paul Ruth?" Cam croaked. "My father?"

"Yeah. You're my brother, Cam. My kid brother."

Cam shook his head. "Aw, no . . . no . . . c'mon . . ." he mumbled.

"Here. Look at this," Revok said.

He dropped a magazine in Cam's lap. It was an old *Life* dated July 22,1947. The cover picture showed a woman and her manservant in a pony trap. Underneath was printed "Long Island Society."

Cam looked at the magazine uncomprehendingly. Revok reached over and flipped it open. He tapped a page.

It was a full-page ad featuring an innocuous bottle of gelatin capsules. The label on the bottle read "Ephemerol."

Behind the bottle, in some adman's brightly tinted version of a tropical sea, was a sailor with billowing, pregnant sails. The slogan heading the page read: "Smooth sailing with Ephemerol." Underneath was a buxom young woman in a yellow summer dress holding aloft a joyous pink baby. Mother and child were bright and happy, a primary-colored image of well-being.

Beneath this charming pair was ad copy which read: "When you're a mother-to-be, the sea of life is often stormy. You can smooth that sea with Ephemerol—safe, effective, soothing. Ephemerol, for anyone, any time clouds threaten."

While Cam was reading this, struggling to absorb the information and the implications, Revok was talking.

"This was the ad for a test campaign used in 1947 to market the new product. It was a tranquilizer aimed at pregnant women. If it had worked the drug would've been marketed all over America. It didn't work."

Revok's voice was dry, expressionless. Cam gazed up at him curiously.

"Ephemerol was a washout. It had a side effect on unborn babies. Nobody knew this because it wasn't traceable."

“It created scanners,” Cam said.

Revok nodded. “Right.” His hand found a small stone sculpture used as a paperweight, a Polynesian beaked bird about four inches high in brown rock.

“The man who invented Ephemerol,” he went on, hefting the paperweight, “wasn’t too disappointed, though. He was excited by the weird mutation caused by his drug, especially in his own sons.”

Revok dropped the beaked bird back on the mahogany with a thump.

“We were his very first guinea pigs, you see. We were the world’s first scanners.”

“Did mother—” Cam began, and stopped. He realized with a shock that he was beginning to believe all this. What convinced him was not so much the story Revok was telling but his own remembered feeling about Paul Ruth. His instinctive trust of that sad man, from the moment he saw him. “Daddy,” he thought, and shuddered.

“No. She never knew till the day she died. She thought her boys were difficult, but Father could always calm them down with a shot of Ephemerol. Finally, though, we were both farmed out.”

“So we’re older than the others?”

“Older and more powerful. Only you and I could scan a computer. The others—my zombies, that guy, Tony, your little friend, Kim—they’re lightweights compared to us.”

Cam’s mind was racing. He asked absently: “What did you need Keller for?”

“ConSec had a lot of hardware. And Keller could see where the future was coming from.”

“Future!” Cam exploded abruptly. “You’ve killed our future!”

Revok rose and looked down at Cam from his full height. “Don’t be negative, Cameron. There’s a whole new generation of scanners just a few months away from being born from the Ephemerol I’ve distributed among all those innocent doctors. Our people, Cam. *Our people!”*

“And what will you do with them?” Cam asked, fearing the reply.

“Rule the world,” Revok said simply.

Cam burst out laughing. He roared. “Rule the world! Ridiculous!”

Revok dropped to his haunches before Cam. He looked up at his younger brother’s face with earnest, deadly serious eyes. He was so close Cam could see right into the tiny crater on his forehead. It was like a miniature volcano about to erupt. It throbbed with pinkish blood under the skin.

“Haven’t you always been despised by the world of ‘normals’? Haven’t they always jeered at you, pointed you out as a freak, a

weirdo, some kind of cockeyed ape? Didn't your own father betray you, use you, exploit you? Do you really think I'm mad to hate them all?"

Cam stared at his brother. He could see the pain in Revok's black pupils. It moved him to pity. It made him want to cry.

"I think," he began slowly, hunting for the right words, "you should stop killing yourself."

Revok blinked. "Huh?"

"Don't you see?" Cam urged. "You're letting your hatred burn you up from inside. Darryl—" he leaned forward urgently—"can't we just be ordinary people, at last, now that we've found one another?"

"Ordinary people!" Revok screeched. "Are you mad? You mean, after all they've put us through, you want to be just like *them?"*

Cam was at a loss before such an intensity of bitterness. He searched around for an answer. His glance fell upon the beaked stone bird and he gripped it in his hand for strength.

"Do you want to end up like him?" he said. "Like Father—an exploiter, a user?"

"Ah," Revok countered, suddenly shrewd. "I wouldn't be Paul Ruth. I'd be Darryl Revok. Understand?"

Cam shook his head. ' 'You're just like him, Darryl. It's—well, as though you've been . . . as if he's been reincarnated in you."

Revok's head jerked back. He couldn't take this. His eyes glinted like a snake's. "That wasn't nice," he said softly.

"Please, Darryl—"

"Cameron, I've been counting on you. All these years . . . Are you going to betray me, like everyone else? Tell me you're not, Cam. Tell me—"

Cam never quite understood why his hand lunged out. He never quite knew why he struck Revok brutally across the left temple with the stone bird.

He regretted it the moment he'd done it—but too late.

Revok fell back heavily on the rug. Blood trickled from the open wound on his head. He reached up a finger and touched it. The tip came away red.

"Ah," he murmured. "Okay, Cameron. We'll do it the other way. The scanner way."

Revok rose to his feet. His eyes were points of black silver.

"I'm going to suck your brain out. Everything you are will become me. I'll inherit your power. We'll be together, no matter what. Brothers."

“Darryl, please,” Cam begged. Pity, compassion, tenderness, even love for this strange, hate-filled, tormented brother made his voice shake.

But it was too late.

Revok’s eyes were chips of black glass as he concentrated on a scan. A low hum filled the air around his narrow head. Cam felt his mind being sucked out like a raw egg.

He fought back, resisting out of a sheer instinct for survival. Beyond that gut resistance was a sense that it was terribly important that the hatred in Revok did not triumph. It was now a simple battle between Good and Evil.

Not that his brother was evil. But there was evil in him that had to be defeated, purified out, purged. And only Cam could do it.

So he fought as he’d never battled in his life.

Their wills locked horns. The scan tone zoomed to a high whine.

Cam was pinned to his chair. The leather seemed to be fusing to his back like a second skin. The forearm of the hand holding the stone paperweight began to bulge. The veins swelled like wet purple ropes. He dropped the rock bird from his melting fingers.

Then the right side of Cam’s face began to swell. The flesh was pumped up into lumps of rock-hard tumor. There was the smell of burning meat in the air. Smoke rose from Cam’s blasted cheek. He howled in anguish.

He was only dimly aware of Revok’s lean axface lunging at him. He heard him say, as from a great distance: “Cameron, don’t be stupid. You can’t fight me. Join me.”

The silent screaming *no!* sprang from somewhere very deep in Cam’s soul. He could never surrender to Revok’s hatred. It was a disembodied force in the room, a stink of pure evil. He resisted it with all his life instinct. He fought back.

Cam stood up, pushing against the giant’s hand that seemed to be shoving his chest. With all the energy, talent and will he had left, he brought his two hands together, palms locked, arms rigid and pointed at Revok like a rifle.

The scan, generated at the base of Cam’s spine, leaped like running fire along his arms and arced into Revok’s face.

Revok’s face cratered. A fissure opened in his cheek, cracking the bone. Underground rivers of blood ran through this wound, darkening the older brother’s scowl. He grunted with pain. The scan tone screeched.

Revok staggered. He looked surprised, even shocked. No one had ever outscanned him before. This was war to the death!

Summoning all his force, Revok reversed the scan flow. Cam felt it hit him like a bursting grenade. His face swelled up like a balloon. The bubbling flesh was green and putrid. An artery popped in his chest, bursting through the cage of his ribs, spurting blood. His body began to rot. His eyes popped like burst grapes spouting jets of blood.

Cam was in agony. He tore lumps off his face to escape the heat of burning meat. The chunks of cheek were smoking in his hands.

Cam sank to his knees. His palms were held out toward Revok like a beggar's asking for alms. The chunks of ripped flesh from his face burst into flames in his hands, little fires of mourning.

But Revok had no mercy. He screwed up all his hatred to suck every last drop of force and goodness from his brother's brain. As the fire consumed Cam's whole body his melting soul fused with Revok's in a marriage of Heaven and Hell.

• epilogue •

Kim's eyes flickered open. "Cameron?" she cried out.

She was lying on a couch in a strange room, a small white cubicle that could have been a cell. There was a door opposite the couch. Kim got up and ran to it.

The door opened into Revok's living room-office.

The wide room was deathly silent. It seemed empty as a tomb robbed of its corpses.

Kim sniffed. There was a faint smell of charring in the air. It seemed very strange in this still, plush space.

Then she saw it.

It was a human form lying on the floor blackened by fire. Its limbs were contorted, its ribs poking up through the charred flesh of its chest. Everything personal about it was burnt away, leaving only this hieroglyph of humanity, this shriveled symbol of a human being.

Kim's stomach heaved. Her knees gave way and she sank to the floor beside the body. The sharp, smoky stench filled her nostrils with an undertow as sweet as scent.

She couldn't bear to look at the black thing beside her, but something compelled her gaze. It was somehow familiar, that *thing.*

Her heart faltered. "Cameron?" she mumbled fearfully.

"Huh?"

The grunt came from the far corner of the room. Kim's eyes swiveled. She saw a huddled form in the corner, covered in Cam's coat. It was stirring.

Kim jumped up. "Cameron?" she cried out.

A head appeared over the edge of the coat collar. It was Revok's.

Kim recoiled. She held out her hand to ward off evil.

But Revok was smiling. His face was serene. His eyes were an innocent and shining hazel. His skin was smooth. The cratered wound in his brow had vanished.

And his voice was Cam's!

"It's me, Kim—Cameron," he murmured, his light eyes full of love. "We've won. We've won!'

And the loving smile on his face was pure as a saint's.

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